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THE INCREDIBLE MELTING MAN

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PHIL
SMITH

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PHIL SMITH

From the screenplay by

WILLIAM SACHS

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TIMES MIRROR

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PROLOGUE ONE

PROMETHEUS ONE broke through the grey cloud cover. Flames seemed to burst from her as the bright orange parachutes were released. For a moment the capsule hung in the sky as if in doubt about where it truly belonged—back there in the cold void of space, or in the warm embrace of the living planet whose waters now stretched to meet it. Then, its mind made up, it began its slow descent through the dawn air of the Pacific.

Long before the splash of white spume signalled her return, a helicopter had left the deck of the one naval vessel to witness the splashdown. It sped across the ocean, cuffing the calm sea into a flurry of turmoil. Only a handful of selected personnel were on deck to see the frogmen begin to release the hatch on the outside of the capsule. Anxious eyes watched as the three spacemen were carried out and winched aboard the helicopter. Minutes later they were being stretchered into the specially prepared quarantine unit and the ship was racing at full speed for the mainland.

ONE

A SCREAM of terror shattered the dawn stillness of the research centre. A door crashed open at the end of the corridor and the uniformed figure of a nurse hurled herself through it. Her clothes were torn and blood-stained and a cruel red scratch ploughed down her cheek and into her neck.

Blind panic propelled her along the corridor where the polished surface of the floor tripped and snared her like a wicked accomplice. She was a fat girl and her huge bosom sobbed and heaved with effort as she clawed her way along the wall.

Her outstretched hand accidentally caught the light switch, throwing the corridor behind her into darkness. From the blackened doorway where she'd come, emerged the sound of breathing, heavy and difficult, like someone drawing alien air. Then the moist pad of footsteps. Something had followed her out into the darkened corridor.

She was running like someone in a nightmare, desperately trying to reach the end of the corridor. But it seemed to retreat and the shadow behind advanced, breathing sharp and urgently, hot on her neck. And the sound of its movements grew, like a heavy wet sack being humped along, slumping against the floor and then lifting stickily, like wet adhesive being peeled back from the shiny tiles.

The girl hurled herself at the window, shivering the glass in all directions; a long shard piercing into her thigh, deep into the living tissue. But she was oblivious to the pain in her panic at the terror in her wake. Gouting blood she picked herself up and staggered across the empty parking lot.

Still the breathing grew, sharper, more eager, sensing the kill. The glass had severed the nerve in her leg and it would no

longer support her huge, hopeless weight. She slithered and fell in a pool of mud and a hand reached down for her.

The fingers parted like claws and strings of glistening mucus stretched between them. She felt the shadow bend over her and the hot breath burn her flesh. Then came the searing pain of teeth sinking into her neck and the life-blood being sucked from her. She squirmed in agony and slipped from under the weight of the thing on the slime which had come off it. Streaking the mud with her blood she clambered to her feet and tried to run again. But it was on her in a flash, bubbling and slobbering in its thirst for her flesh, wrestling to gain a grip with hands that slid over her body, sloughing off its own tissue.

Then it stopped, conscious of its own body slowly dissolving. It let out a cry, half human and afraid, so that the girl was forced to look into its eyes. For a moment, shame and fear struggled with some other impulse. Then it uttered another cry, cold and empty of humanity as the space between stars, and struck with renewed fury. Her skull collapsed and crushed the life within.

His fingers drummed distractedly on the desk in front of him. then, his mind made up, he reached for the phone.

‘Get me General Perry in Houston, will you? And put it through the scrambler.’

Doctor Theodore Nelson glanced apprehensively at his assistant as he waited for the reply.

‘What are you going to tell him?’ asked the other man.

‘What the hell can I tell him, except that Steve’s loose, and he’s killed, and if we don’t get him soon he’ll kill again.’

‘But he’s going to want some explanation.’

‘Well, I haven’t got one!’ exploded Nelson.

‘All right,’ replied the assistant. ‘I’m only trying to be helpful.’ There was a tense silence.

‘Will you mention the radiation?’ went on the assistant. ‘It was most pronounced on the body, though the spot where we found her was contaminated too. Not enough to be a risk to personnel, but enough to be significant.’

Doctor Nelson made to answer as the phone rang. His hand shook as he reached for it.

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'Hello? General? Good of you to ring so promptly, sir. I'm afraid I've some bad news, sir. It's West. He's escaped.'

There was a gasp of dismay at the other end of the phone. The General's voice barked down the line.

'How in God's name could he?'

Nelson did his best to explain. 'He was stronger than the others,' he began. 'That's why he's lasted so long. Where he got the strength to kill the girl, I don't know. The tissue degeneration is already at an advanced stage. We're baffled.'

The silence stretched like a force field before the General replied.

'You say he's killed a girl?'

Nelson explained about the nurse.

'Why aren't you out looking for him, Doctor?' came the curt response.

'I've got some men out after him now, but we're hamstrung by security. If we bring in anyone else and the press get to know, there's going to be a panic. I'm using as many men as I dare.'

Again the silence. Then: 'I'm coming over. We've got twenty-four hours to find out just what's going on. Nothing must interfere with the next phase of the programme. Understand?' He hung up before the doctor had time to reply.

Nelson snapped the ballpoint pen he'd been nervously fiddling with during the telephone conversation.

'Sod the programme!' he ejaculated. 'I might have known it would be the only thing that mattered to him. Typical of the Pentagon. The whole expedition amounts to nothing more than an exercise in military prestige as far as they're concerned.' All the self-control of the past few hours seemed to have ebbed. 'They don't give a damn that there's a man out there going through agony. My friend!' He fought to suppress the image of what he'd seen happening to Steve as he lay in the unit's hospital. 'And they expect me to go along with their ludicrous cover-up,' he added bitterly.

The assistant rested a comforting arm on his shoulder. 'He won't know much about what's going on, will he?' he asked.

Nelson wasn't listening. 'Judy's not going to take this at all well, Dick,' he said. 'She was very fond of Steve. The shock could mess things up again.'

Dick Loring didn't understand.

'My wife's pregnant again,' Nelson explained. 'It's our third try. She lost the other two around this time—about fourteen weeks.'

They lapsed into silence. The morning sunlight was streaming in through the lab window, falling now for the first time on the bulky figure lying on the bench by the wall and draped with a white sheet. The red stains shone like poppies.

'Pray God they've caught up with him,' said Nelson, clenching his knuckles and looking out across the car park towards the woods where the men with the Geiger counters had disappeared in search of his patient.

Loring glanced apprehensively at the body under the sheet.

'Do you think he'll try and kill again?' he asked.

The doctor shook his head. 'I don't know. By rights he should be *in extremis*, unable to move. The effects of the pain-killing drugs will be wearing off all the time. The tests show his brain and internal organs are decomposing as rapidly as the epidermal layers. His ability to function rationally will be hopelessly impaired. It's the only explanation for what he did to the nurse.'

He drew his hand across his forehead as if to try and brush away the unsavoury thoughts that began to invade his brain.

'There's nothing in his background to suggest an aggressive nature,' went on the doctor, tormenting himself in the search for a clue to the grotesque change in his patient's behaviour.

The truth was that Steve had been the sensitive one—Nelson had begun to realise that only recently as their friendship had deepened. The training for the flight tended to ignore such things, something Nelson was growing bitterly aware of. But—he'd come to recognise it as he'd monitored their condition during the flight—Steve was the thinker, the poet of the expedition. He was the one the flight had affected most profoundly.

Nelson's eyes clouded with pity and concern as he thought about his friend. 'I'd put his chances of coming out of the coma at zero, especially when the other two died. Then suddenly, this.' He gestured despairingly at the lifeless bundle over by the wall.

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But still he rejected any notion of Steve's culpability.

'Something happened up there,' he insisted. 'It not only caused a decomposition of the cellular structure, but it also induced a completely alien and regressive behaviour pattern. He's developing all the characteristics of a wild animal. Biting, scratching—' He hesitated, fighting a spasm of nausea that threatened to overcome him. 'And cannibalism.'

'Except that wild animals usually stop at cannibalism,' corrected Loring gently. 'Unless there's a very good reason for it.'

'And that's what we've got to find out, at once,' cried Nelson, rousing himself out of his state of numbed shock.

'I want a thorough examination of her body. I want to know what all that mucus is and where it's come from. It must contain traces of the infectious organism somewhere. I want us to find it. We've got to know what got hold of them up there.'

He cast a determined glance through the window. 'Meanwhile, I'll get in touch with the search party. If only we can talk to him and find out what went on, we're in with a chance of saving him.'

'And the others,' added Loring.

Nelson nodded grimly. 'And the others, if those lunatics in charge at Houston get their way.'

TWO

THE MORNING sunlight danced on the surface of the river, fractured light quivering in a thousand silver fragments. The blue sky was caught there too in the glassy grain of the unfolding water, gently moving, oblivious of the impending fury of the waterfall further downstream.

The surface light changed to life above the water where shimmering clouds of mayflies rose and fell in imitation of the river. Higher still and the invisible trill of lark song poured from the bright sky, mingling with all the other sounds that bathed the scene and stretched as far as the horizon where the sunlight glinted on the metal roof of the research centre.

Trees lined the bank at one side of the river, casting a shadow over the water. Here sat a fisherman, sheltered from the sun and best able to see the rocky bottom of the river where his prey lurked.

He was engrossed in preparing his line. He carefully held a small hook in the fingers of one hand, and with the other meticulously drew out the soft pink body of a worm, impaled it gently on the hook just above the worm's pale saddle and pulled the squirming body over the barb until it was firmly hooked. A tiny drop of blood glistened on his thumb.

Then he lifted the prepared rod, watched the worm flex on the hook a moment, and cast into the passing waters. He checked the advance of the line with his reel, bringing it to a halt with a final click. With his eyes half closed he settled back to watch the float bobbing lightly in the shadows.

He hadn't long to wait. With a sudden tug the float disappeared and the fisherman jerked his rod. He felt the line grow taut as the fish struggled to swim free. But he checked the reel and it began to click as he stealthily drew in the line.

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The fish suddenly breasted the surface, kicked over in a flash of silver as the sunlight caught its underside, and locked itself tighter on the wicked barb. The fisherman continued to reel in the line in the same unhurried way until the fish was visible close to the bank. He deftly swept his landing net underneath its body and raised it gently into the daylight.

He parted the wet string of the net where the fish struggled vainly. The gumless mouth was open, panting in the alien air, round eyes flat and empty. He gently prised the mouth further open to locate the hook, trying to push it back through the soft white flesh of the gasping mouth, back the way it had come. But the barb had taken and he had to push hard, so that he could hear the sound of the tissue tearing. His hand grew hot and moist against the cold slime of the fish's body. He hated this part of it. He closed his eyes and tugged and the hook came out, some of the inside of the fish's mouth still attached.

He placed the panting fish into his keep net where it lay on its side, moving only with the motion of the river. A trickle of blood leaked from its mouth into the water. He stooped to wash the sticky scales off his hands and the blood inside him rushed to his head so that he didn't hear the sound of a stick crack in the undergrowth behind him.

After he'd washed his hands he didn't bait the hook again immediately but rummaged in his basket. He was hungry. He'd been up since dawn and was feeling faint for want of something to eat. He found a brown paper bag and drew out a sandwich. He inspected the contents, gave a hum of approval and sunk his teeth into the soft white bread and began to chew. There was the stir of leaves from the undergrowth behind him.

He glanced round, still chewing. Some animal? A rat maybe, or even a bird. He was a keen animal-lover, so he sat quietly, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever it was.

He reached noiselessly for another sandwich. He'd taken only one bite when the bushes stirred again, more loudly. From them came the sound of heavy breathing.

The fisherman jumped to his feet. 'Who's there?' he called.

No answer. He frowned, not satisfied. Placing the sandwich carefully down on the brown paper bag, he walked towards the

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undergrowth on the edge of the group of trees. The sound of breathing grew, gasping, quick and eager.

The man stopped and picked up a stick. 'Who is it?' he cried, a tremor of fear entering his voice.

'Come on, quit playing games!'

There was a sudden noise behind him. He swung round raising the stick, only to see a snake slithering away from him through the grass. He saw the scales glint, hard and burnished green in the bright sunlight.

He smiled with relief, tossed the stick away and was about to step back towards the river bank when a large mucousy hand grabbed his face.

He shouted out to breathe as his mouth and nose filled with slime. It reeked with a foul putrescence that burnt his lungs and filled him with nausea. As he struggled a wet arm locked round his neck and constricted his windpipe. The hand began pulling at his face, hard bone poking through the slime and scraping at his features, trying to tear them off. The blood splashed into his eyes, mixing with the stinging mucus and blinding his vision. As his head was torn backwards he glimpsed his attacker through the haze: a blurred and yeasty face with bolting eyes, red and oozing and filled with rage. Then the blackness came, and he was consumed in the roar of his own escaping blood and bursting sinews.

The thing watched the pool of blood spread slowly outwards. In its decomposing mind it saw the red surface of the approaching planet. The Prometheus descent module was feeling her way carefully through the thin atmosphere towards touchdown. They could already count the scores of small craters that pitted the red and ochre-coloured desert. Through the mauve haze of the distant horizon they saw the white carbon dioxide deposits of the polar region creeping round the curve of the planet like frozen fingers. The satellite Phobos slipped like a pale wraith, pocked and distorted, through the dark blue sky to meet them.

The black emptiness of space which had lasted so long was filled with the red emptiness of Mars. For

weeks the stars had stared unblinkingly at the audacity of their progress, but here the eyes of the planet were closed. It slept in its shroud of red dust, entombed in silence, oblivious of its visitor. Almost.

Far below them something began to stir in the approaching desert. Where a range of jagged hills stood, the planetary surface was becoming rippled and grained. A red haze began to obscure the details, blurring the sharp contours of the craters and spreading across the landscape like a red stain. Gathering its loose edges it scurried towards them, a red shadow flitting across the brilliant sunlit surface of the planet. And like a shadow of themselves it came to rest on the spot where their module was descending.

Inexorably they fell to meet it. Moments before they landed, tendrils rose up to engulf them and their vision was blotted out in a swirling red night.

In blind panic the thing hurled the dripping object it was holding into the river and clawed at its own eyes, plucking at the red and swimming image that had lodged there. But the choking heat inside him rose like a tide of acid and the shrieking alien cells clamoured to be fed. They beat down the resistance of his broken will, and exulting in his dark shame stooped to feed off the still-warm carcass.

Out there in the cold desert something flexed and grew stronger, cementing its new links with the earth, links with the frozen flinch of death on the face that bounced and bobbed along the surface of the stream in a trail of blood.

THREE

TED NELSON pushed his stool away from the bench and drew his hands up behind his head.

‘What do you make of this, Dick?’ he demanded of his assistant.

Loring broke off from the slides he was preparing and peered into the microscope.

‘Looks to be a simple cellular structure to me,’ he replied. ‘In fact, very simple, only—’ He broke off, a note of doubt entering his voice.

‘Yes?’ asked Nelson eagerly.

‘Well, it’s the nucleus. It’s massive. Where did you find it?’

‘Where didn’t I find it?’ corrected the doctor. ‘It was all over her wounds. It came from the mucus that—’ he hesitated to use his friend’s name, ‘—that he left behind.’ He broke off, hurriedly glancing at his watch. ‘How long is it going to be before you have the slides of the autopsy ready?’

‘They’re virtually finished,’ replied Loring. ‘I’m on the last batch now.’

‘Good. Pass me a few. Say blood lymph, and stomach wall. And send a batch right away for a scan on the electron microscope. Tell them to concentrate on any particularly large nuclei they may find.’ He placed one of the newly prepared slides he’d just been given under the microscope.

‘If I’m not mistaken,’ he went on, ‘I think you’ll find that our little monster here is cropping up all over the place.’ He spent only moments examining the specimen before he found what he wanted.

‘There,’ he announced. ‘Take a look at that.’

The plate contained a blood smear. Amongst the many red

cells appeared the large colourless cells with the enlarged nuclei. Loring whistled. 'How the hell did they get there?' he exclaimed.

'Exactly,' mused Nelson. 'What do they remind you of?' he asked.

Loring hesitated, feeling awkward at the simplicity of his answer. 'Well,' he said at last. 'They're amoeba-like.'

The doctor nodded. 'Very amoeba-like.' He looked grim. 'I've examined every sample of Steve's—of his tissue that came off on to the nurse, and they're there, often in great numbers. The tissues aren't degenerating in the sense that we know it, of decay. They're degenerating into a simpler structure, a sort of cellular atavism. It's like evolution in reverse, where the cells have lost their specialised structure and returned to a basic form. But—' Here he paused, struggling with the unprecedented facts. 'But the enlargement of the nucleus suggests that the process isn't finished, but that the cells have simplified in order to begin again, build a different structure. Why else do we have such a disproportionate mass of nuclear material?'

'But what the hell could be controlling such a change?' objected Loring. 'We found no trace of virus activity on the others, nothing carcinomatous, not even any tissue damage to explain the radiation.'

He stopped, struck by a sudden thought. 'He won't live, will he? I mean he couldn't live through the sort of cellular reorganisation you're talking about, fantastic as it sounds. He'd just turn to jelly.'

Nelson felt sick at this unpleasant extrapolation of the fate of his friend. Loring had the pathologist's habit of seeing people merely as a collection of physiological functions.

'Get those plates down to the electron microscope, will you?' he said wearily. 'I'm going home for half an hour to brace myself for the arrival of General Perry. Give me a ring the moment you hear anything from the search party.'

He left the lab and walked along the corridor. The blood-stained floor and walls had already been wiped clean and workmen had been and boarded up the broken window. Everything had assumed a peaceful normality as he stepped out into the bright sunlight of the parking lot. Nevertheless he couldn't help

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but notice the ominous pile of damp-looking sand as he cut across to his flat at the far end of the complex.

Funny that he'd not heard anything first thing this morning; he was normally a light sleeper. He felt his temples suddenly prickly as he thought of Judy looking out of the window and witnessing the scene. It was going to be bad enough breaking the news to her. She'd have to know. They'd have to entertain Perry and she'd be bound to smell a rat when he arrived. In any case, he desperately needed her moral support.

She was upstairs resting when he entered the house. Without disturbing her he made himself a cup of coffee and sat down in the lounge to relax and think. The sun was streaming in through the window and aggravating the headache that had nagged him all morning.

He walked over to draw the blinds, gazing out at the lab and following the line the search party had taken. Where the hell had he gone? What had been going on in his decomposing mind? He fought back the hideous notion that had plagued his brain since he'd discovered the mutant cell. What was the *raison d'être* of an amoeba except to feed and ultimately reproduce? He'd need continual nourishment to synthesise the massive amounts of nuclear material contained in those cells. And he was taking it directly by ingesting vast quantities of human tissue.

Only panic dislodged the sickening image of the mutilated nurse from Nelson's mind. My God! he thought. He'd made straight for the domestic quarters after killing the nurse—the only other source of food at that time of day!

He was seized with fear for the safety of his wife. He was upstairs now! That's why the search party had missed him!

He jumped up, splashing coffee over the carpet. He dashed upstairs and flung open the bedroom door. Sunlight was filtering through the net curtains on to the composed features of his sleeping wife. She stirred, opened her eyes, and gave him a happy smile.

'Hello, darling. What's the matter? You look in a state.'

His anxiety melted when he saw his wife's tranquil face. How beautiful she looked, and healthy. He was sure she could make it this time and have the child they so desperately wanted. If only—

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In that moment he determined to keep the news about Steve from her at all costs. He'd shoulder the worry alone.

'It's nothing, love,' he said. 'Nothing at all. Things have been a bit hectic at the lab, that's all. We've got some big-wig coming down from Houston and I've had to jump to getting a few reports together.'

Judy's face clouded with concern. 'How is Steve?' she asked.

'No change, I'm afraid,' he lied. He frowned as a thought struck him. 'Darling,' he said, reaching for her warm hand. 'Don't let on to General Perry that you know anything about Steve. You're not supposed to know he's here, you know. It's strict security.'

'General Perry?' she exclaimed. 'Coming here? Isn't he in charge of operations, and during countdown—Ted, darling, something is wrong, isn't it?'

'Perry's just a figurehead,' he bluffed. 'Things will continue OK without him. He's just flying over for a while.'

He was saved by the telephone, yet the sound made him start nervously. He excused himself and went downstairs to answer it.

'Hello, Nelson.'

The curt crackle of General Perry's voice burst down the line. 'Found him yet, Nelson?' he demanded.

'No, sir. But we're doing our best.'

'I should bloody well hope you are,' exploded the General. 'It's as much as your job's worth, Nelson, if you don't get him quick. And if any of this gets out I shouldn't give much for the future of your lab, either. Understand?'

He slammed down the phone, leaving the doctor staring hopelessly at the receiver. Judy had come downstairs and was standing watching him from the doorway.

'Hadn't you better tell me what it's all about?' she said quietly, moving towards him and brushing a tangle of hair from his forehead. 'Come on.'

She drew him to the settee, brushing her soft lips against his cheek. 'Unshaven?' she scolded gently. 'My! You must have been up in a hurry this morning. What is it?'

He gave himself up to the sweet warmth of her body. For a moment he felt defenceless, like a child. He'd have loved to have curled up in the soft safety of her womb where their child

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was. He placed his hand on her stomach to see if he could feel the swelling yet. The perfect sanctuary for the child to develop, for the cells to divide and grow in peace.

She felt his hand stiffen and his body grow rigid.

'What's the matter, love?' she enquired.

Like a poison the thought had seeped back into his mind. The grotesque gestation within Steve's body. What hideous destructive seed from out there in space had lodged there? He'd hated Loring's ruthless logic, but what was the ultimate purpose of the mutant cells? The amoeba feeds to reproduce. What unearthly offspring would grow from the jelly that was once his friend?

'I'm sorry, love,' he said, seeing his wife's look of alarm. 'It's Steve. It's a lot worse than we thought.'

'Contagious?'

'Sort of,' he replied. 'But there's nothing for you to worry about.' He rose to leave. 'Look, Judy, love, I must get back to the lab. I'll tell you more when I can. Promise.'

In the heat of high noon the waterfall drew them. The cool stream slid like silk to the edge, was held in the vertical blast of the torrent, then burst on the rocks below in stinging clouds of spray.

Two boys, about eight or nine, sat on the bank at the base of the falls in the shade and security of the overhanging bushes. One of them puffed inexpertly at a cigarette watched by the eager eyes of the other.

'Come on. Give me a go, Billy.'

Billy stuck assiduously to his task, tentatively drawing the hot smoke into his lungs before exploding in a fit of coughing. The other boy saw his advantage and grabbed the cigarette from Billy's shaking hand.

'There, told you it would make you choke,' cried Peter triumphantly. 'Watch me!'

He drew fiercely on the cigarette until the end glowed red, then just as fiercely expelled the smoke in a noisy splutter.

'You didn't do the swallow,' protested Billy.

The noise of the waterfall drowned the sound of the approaching footsteps. A hand settled on Peter's shoulder.

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'Ah, Peter Brightwell,' piped a small shocked voice. 'I'll tell Mom over you.'

Peter swung round guiltily then scowled contemptuously at his younger sister. 'I'll bash you if you do,' he threatened.

The threat worked and the small girl ignored the cigarette.

'Mom said you had to play with me,' insisted the girl. 'She said you'd got to look after me.' She looked down with a mixture of pleading and hero-worship in her eyes. Peter scowled more forcefully, nonchalantly drawing on the cigarette until the smoke was in his mouth then spitting it like poison.

'Clear off!' he snarled.

The little girl refused to be intimidated but sat down resolutely on the bank beside her brother, drawing her knees up to her chest and staring up at the waterfall with pure blue eyes.

'Isn't it beautiful?' she sighed.

Peter sneered scornfully and turned his back on her, generously handing the soggy cigarette to his friend. Billy, equally generously, declined the offer.

'Let's play a game,' suggested the girl brightly after a few moments.

The idea met with a mute response. Undeterred the little girl went on. 'Why not play hide and seek?' she cried. She looked round at the wood-lined river bank. 'It's a lovely place for hide and seek.'

A furtive gleam entered the eyes of her brother. 'OK,' he said, clambering to his feet. 'Come on, Billy,' he said, giving his friend a sly nudge. 'Let's play hide and seek with Carol.'

He led the way into the trees, selecting a large pine where he stopped.

'Right,' he ordered. 'Carol, you're It.'

Carol pulled a face. 'I don't want to be It. You be It and me and Billy'll hide.'

Peter shook his head determinedly. 'No, unless you're It, I'm not playing.'

Carol gave in reluctantly and approached the tree. She grasped the trunk, making to hide her face, when her hand touched something sticky. She drew it away with a cry of disgust, a string of slime hanging from her fingers.

'What's that?' she cried.

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'Nothing,' replied her brother. 'Don't be so soft. Wipe it on the grass. Ready?'

Carol held her hand away from her, screwing up her small features with distaste and wiping the hand vigorously on a clump of grass at the base of the tree. She was very unhappy.

'Right,' called her brother. 'Close your eyes and count to fifty.'

'Fifty?' she protested. 'That's too much.'

'Fifty,' insisted Peter. 'Or we don't play.'

Carol turned grudgingly towards the tree-trunk and covered her eyes. In her small blue dress she was dwarfed by its massive girth. She began to count.

The boys set off down the path. They'd only got a few yards before Peter grabbed Billy and steered him away to the edge of the wood. They broke into a run when they were out of the trees and disappeared across a field.

Carol continued to count, oblivious of their total departure. She was having some difficulty with the higher numbers and it was a long time before she reached fifty. Her small shrill voice scrupulously counting out the numbers was the only sound to disturb the encroaching silence of the wood.

When she'd finished she uncovered her eyes and turned. A happy smile lit her face as she grew to the excitement of the game.

'Coming,' she called, but the sound fell flat in the wood's heavy stillness.

First she crept stealthily round the tree, craning her small neck in the hope of catching a glimpse of them before they saw her. Nothing.

There was another thick trunk deeper inside the wood. That would make a good hiding place she thought, moving towards it, concentrating with all her might not to stir the dead leaves underfoot. Her breathing came in short bursts as she grew out of breath with the effort of stealth and her mounting excitement.

There was no one behind the second large tree, and her disappointment came out in a sharp sigh. The wood had grown darker, trees crowding in. She looked about her with mounting confusion. There were so many good hiding places now, she

didn't know where to start. As she became aware of the stillness she began to grow afraid.

Suddenly she heard a stick crack in the undergrowth. The worried frown melted and the excited smile returned. It had come from behind the silver-barked tree over there. She crept towards it, then stood for a moment listening.

She felt sure she heard breathing.

She hesitated, her fear returning.

'Come on out,' she called. 'I heard you. Peter? Billy?'

Silence. Now she heard nothing but the pounding of her own heart.

'Come on out,' she cried tearfully. 'I've caught you.'

Still nothing stirred and she approached the tree warily. Then, she gave a sudden jump, compressing all her own fear and alarm into the movement and letting out a cry meant to frighten the hider into revealing himself.

There was no one behind the tree.

As her disappointment began to crystallise into panic she caught the sound of leaves stirring behind her. The breathing was unmistakable, heavy and pained. She shrank against the bole of the tree, her hands coming into contact with something sticky. She let out a terrified scream and burst into tears.

Slowly, out of the undergrowth where he'd been crouching, the thing rose to look at her.

She stood transfixed with horror as it stumbled towards her. The torn and blood-stained remains of a white hospital gown flapped around it, from which the pale limbs protruded, the flesh grey and swollen like a corpse the sea has had time to work on. The hands were outstretched, half questing, half in supplication. The face was a mutilation, features running like melting cheese, so that the hard case of the skull began to poke through at the brow, the cheek bones, and the jaws. The eyeballs swam restless and hungry in their red and bleeding sockets.

He reached for her face, a trail of mucus falling heavily on to the blue flowers of her dress. Then the fingers faltered and a thin and ragged cloud of memory drifted across the unholy landscape of his face. The sunken lips began to work and be-

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tween the heaving gasps of breath came the choked fragments of a word. It sounded like 'girl'.

Carol closed her eyes and ran, tumbling over the outstretched roots of a tree. She opened her eyes and the awful monster had gone. Screaming for her mother she rushed away into the wood.

The thing turned slowly, almost sadly, and watched her go. Then the red fury struck and the heat rose up inside him, spilling into his eyes until they burned with the unquenchable thirst to kill. He lunged after her, plucking wildly at the overhanging branches which blocked his way. A hidden strength drove him, fuelling the tired cells to a new impetus. Smashing his way through the undergrowth he burst out of the wood into the blinding sunlight.

His sickened mind reeled, throwing up the broken memories.

The computer had brought the module down right at the centre of a dust storm. It was a freakish piece of ill luck, yet nothing seemed to be damaged apart from the radio. Contact with mission control was dead. Their outside cameras showed nothing, and through the windows all they could see were the swirling clouds of red dust. All they could do was to sit tight and wait for the storm to pass. Their schedule told them to rest before beginning their exploration, so they settled down to an uneasy sleep.

His mind was crammed with indelible images of their journey. The long weeks in space where the jewels of the galaxy hung and burned with a still radiance; watching the earth shrink from a crystal ball of aquamarine swept with dazzling white cloud, to just another star. That had been the most frightening thing, and at the same time the most exhilarating. It was like saying goodbye to your humanity, leaving behind the comfortable normal proportions of everyday perceptions and taking on the vision of gods. Out in space you rubbed shoulders with infinity, you thought in terms of light years, saw quite clearly beyond the galaxy. There was nowhere to shrink away and contemplate your own littleness, the universe

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shone in through your window always. For out there, time was always. You soon stopped thinking in terms of days in that endless night. They were being swept along in the huge circle of universal time where beginning and end met beyond the reaches of human thought, beyond God. Because God didn't exist in the void, only the unfaltering logic of cold physics, laws set in motion by Chance to run inexorably. Chance that brought stars to collide and men to set foot on alien worlds. Chance that brought them down now, right in the eye of the red storm.

He slept only fitfully. The sound of the sand being whipped against the hull of the module never left his consciousness. It was like tiny claws scraping, tentatively exploring the strange arrival from space. And when it had found out what they were, the scratching grew more urgent, more determined. It was scratching to be let in.

When the sound did stop it seemed only moments before he was being roused by his colleagues. Outside it was the high noon of the Martian day. Under the shrunken sun the desert shone like copper. Miles of glowing plains etched with startling clarity against the deep purple skyline. Above, faint wisps of paler blue streaked the tenuous atmosphere from which the weak daylight had failed to lodge the steadily burning stars.

They had completed their perilous journey through the stars and a silent empty world stood waiting for them. They were like actors in an empty theatre with no one to applaud their wild act of heroism. Only as they looked out into the silent red desert and watched the motionless stars above did they become aware that the whole universe held its breath at their temerity.

As well as the broken radio contact there was another problem. The radiation level within the module had mysteriously risen. It was not dangerous, but it was significant. And it appeared to be coming from the air lock on the escape hatch.

They decided to postpone the walk until the mystery

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was cleared up. The radiation shield could have been damaged in the storm, or by a meteorite on their journey from earth. The radiation must be coming from the planet's surface. The unmanned probes hadn't shown any dangers, but then they hadn't landed in a dust storm.

Steve took a Geiger counter over to the hatch and the clicks increased. Their suits were stored in the airlock, so he was unable to take the precaution of putting one on. Still, the level was low. He unscrewed the hatch and swung open the door. He pushed the counter inside the airlock and listened as the clicks intensified. He closed the door again. They'd come forty million miles to be met by a wall of radiation that was preventing them from setting foot on the planet.

Steve decided he'd got to take a risk and grab a suit. A short burst of radiation wasn't going to do any permanent harm, and he was convinced it wasn't a strong dose. Again he opened the door, this time stepping inside. As he reached for a suit he became aware of a red stain on the inside of the hull, just where the escape hatch was hinged.

As he watched it, it spread slowly, like blood. He reached out to touch it and it felt warm and sticky. He drew back his hand in alarm.

He stood at the edge of the wood, glistening in the sunlight. His smeared face contorted with fear as he fell to the ground and began rubbing his decomposing hand furiously against the grass. The loose flesh slid off, leaving a trail of slime.

In his private frenzy he seemed to have forgotten the little girl running away across the field like a tiny blue doll.

FOUR

'HIS BODY'S become the host for some sort of parasite, that much is clear. What the parasite is, I shudder to think.'

Ted Nelson handed the plate to his assistant.

'I've ringed the alien cells,' he went on. 'And these other plates show details of their nuclear structure. The incredible thing is, they're germ cells.'

Loring whistled under his breath. 'You mean his body has become invaded by eggs?'

'Basically, that's it,' nodded the doctor gravely. 'Out there his body became infected—or fertilised, if the notion isn't too revolting—and cellular multiplication is already taking place. With the added complication that it's his own cells that are providing the protoplasmic material for the thing to develop.'

'But what sort of thing?' asked Loring. 'What in God's name is it?'

The doctor handed him another plate. 'Here's the blueprint,' he said pointing to the detailed magnification of the nucleus. 'Just look at that.'

Loring was staggered. 'But the chromosome content,' he gasped. 'It's massive. There must be ten times more than in a human cell. What the hell is it?' he repeated.

Nelson thought deeply. 'I'd be tempted to say, something ten times more complicated than we are, but it's not so straightforward. There's something physiologically improbable about any parasitic species behaving in such a way. You see, Steve's not going to last much longer the way these cells are developing.'

'Unless he continues to kill,' added Loring bleakly.

Their worried silence was broken by the sound of the tele-

phone. Neither was anxious to answer it. It was Loring who reached for the receiver. His brow contracted as he took the message.

'It's bad,' he said as he replaced the receiver. 'They've found the body of a fisherman, badly mutilated. It sounds like him again.'

Nelson looked sick, staring blankly at the plate before him.

'General Perry's not going to be pleased either,' went on Loring. 'It wasn't the search party that found him, but a couple of kids. They went straight to the police. They knew we had a search party in the area and they've put two and two together. There's a lieutenant in reception waiting to see you.'

'That's all we needed,' groaned Nelson. 'Come on, we'd better go and see the worst.'

'And let's hope it is the worst and there's not more to come,' he muttered to himself as they left the lab.

The fisherman's corpse was in an appalling state. Even Loring felt sick. The head had been torn off and the neck gnawed down to the shoulder-blades. His clothes were in shreds and the wounds gaped through, deep bites into the fleshy parts of the body which glistened with mucus.

'Why is he so bloody strong if the tissues are degenerating?' whispered Loring.

Nelson bit his lip and didn't speak. He drew the lieutenant aside and did his best to invent a plausible story. It was a psychopathic patient that they'd had under observation in the lab. He'd gone berserk and escaped with some surgical instruments.

It was a poor effort and the look on the policeman's face reflected the fact. Nevertheless he was mercifully in agreement about not letting the story out and panicking the neighbourhood. Fortunately there were few houses in the area and it wouldn't be too difficult to alert the occupants to the need for keeping their doors locked. Extra police would be drafted in at the disposal of the research centre staff.

Nelson thanked the lieutenant and hurried towards a group from the search party that had just arrived. He was angry.

'What the hell have you lot been doing?' he stormed. 'This

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needn't have happened if you'd worked faster. Why haven't you caught him?"

The man in charge protested about the difficulties of covering such overgrown terrain. Also he'd had a good start on them. Nelson knew this to be true, but he had to vent his fear and frustration on someone. Perry would be due in an hour. They simply had to have him by then.

'Where have you been concentrating?' he demanded.

The leader pointed towards the wood. 'There are plenty of positive readings over there,' he said.

Nelson grabbed a Geiger counter. 'Right. What are we waiting for?' he announced. 'When we reach the edge, fan out and we'll try to sweep the whole length of the wood.'

It had grown extremely hot. The heat rose from the tarmacked surface of the airstrip, distorting the horizon. The windsock hung limp and motionless.

Doctor Nelson glanced mechanically at his watch, put his head down and marched towards the wood. He must be in there if they'd got readings. Probably exhausted, or even dead. The thought rang hollow as the image of the mutilated fisherman crept into his mind. His strength had become superhuman. No one could pull off a man's head.

He shuddered. He'd entered the wood and the sweat on his face and body seemed to have chilled instantly. The nearest other member of the party was a hundred yards away and disappearing into a spur of trees. He switched the counter on and swept it in an arc in front of his advancing step. His movements were impeded by the undergrowth, and the effort of keeping his arms outstretched was making him sweat again.

He'd spent ten minutes fruitlessly searching without getting a sound out of the counter when he stopped to rest against a tree trunk. What the hell was he up to, searching for a man with a Geiger counter? A friend. He'd begun to think of Steve as some errant specimen, not as a colleague with whom he'd worked for five years in preparation for the mission. Five years as his doctor and psychiatrist. There wasn't anything he didn't know about Steve. He'd spent months observing and recording his reactions in the space simulator, logging his minutest response to the

deprivations of space travel. They'd worked together on the design of the biotechnical apparatus for the experiments. For the last weeks before take-off they'd spent much of their spare time together discussing their worries and fears about the mission. Steve had been the mission as far as he was concerned.

Yes, that was the trouble. He'd thought of him as the human apparatus of the mission all along. That's what spacemen were, you couldn't afford to have them different. He'd deceived himself all along thinking that he really knew Steve, as a friend. Steve's real mind, the warm, fragile, fallible thing that most people responded to as the essence of the person they knew and loved, he didn't know that. Unconsciously he'd done his best to keep that out of their relationship. It was unnecessary and a hindrance in the working relationship he'd sought. For the mission they'd been looking for disciplined machinery that wouldn't go wrong, and his job had been to help to train that machine. Now it had gone wrong, and the very area where the most havoc was being wrought, the mind, Steve's mind, was a dark corridor. As dark and inscrutable as the thing that had infected it, out there in deepest space.

Ted Nelson felt sick with fear and guilt for the man who'd been his protégé, the leader of his mission. What could he do now for Steve's cleft mind? It was a mind trained to the highest mental discipline, prepared for every crisis that technology could throw at him—rocket failure, support system malfunction, they'd been ready for it all. But this! The insidious invasion of his mind by the naked impulses of a predatory animal, his brain programmed by the craving of the alien cells to that of a murderous dinosaur. They could never have foreseen this.

Yet the guilt gnawed. Perhaps they could have prepared them . . . Perhaps they could have treated them more like men and less like machines, so they'd have been less vulnerable. Perhaps more love—?

The doctor fought back the emotion that rose to his throat. He switched on the machine again and stepped further into the wood. Suddenly the Geiger counter began to click.

He probed the moist humus of the forest floor with the machine. The rate of the clicks began to pick up and he slowly

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edged forward into the shadows where the trees were densest. He was on a track Steve had taken pretty recently.

As the wood began to darken a new fear grew. Supposing Steve couldn't recognise him? Supposing he was the next victim? Steve had known the nurse, long before the mission. She was the fat jolly one all three of them used to joke with. But it hadn't stopped him. Nelson pushed the fear to the back of his mind. Steve needed him desperately. He couldn't let him down now.

The clicks were coming fast now, increasing all the time. The radiation was rising from a dark clump of holly bushes tucked beneath the trunks of the larger pines which climbed up to block out the sky light.

He stopped and switched off the machine so that he could hear better. The silence flowed round him.

As he strained to listen, he caught the sound of the blood beating in his ears. Then a branch stirred above his head.

He jerked upwards in time to see the erect tail of a squirrel disappear into the foliage of a tree. His heart began to pound.

Slowly he approached the dark thicket. He flicked the switch of the machine again and it rattled out an urgent warning. Again he faltered.

'Steve,' he called. 'Steve, it's me, Ted. Ted Nelson.'

The silence swallowed his words.

'Steve,' he called tremulously. 'I've come to help you.'

Again nothing. One step further and he'd reached the outstretched branches of the holly tree. He gripped a branch firmly and a spine pierced the soft flesh of his palm. He flinched but maintained his grip, drawing back the branch. He peered into the hollow gloom. Something glistened.

'Steve?' he whispered. Then he recoiled.

Lying on a bed of rotting holly leaves was a hand. The fingers were running like jelly.

The choking sob was lost in the thick bed of dead leaves. Face down he lay, like an over-ripe fruit, running flesh covering the corrupt seeds he bore. His tears, tainted by decay, drained away into the fertile earth.

He shook with despair. The earth would not hide him. That's

what it had wanted, the thing up there, for him to take root in the wholesome soil of Earth and bring forth its own foulness. His mission had been so cruelly reversed: they had set out bearing life to the dead planet, and had returned with death. If they'd only known, they could have stayed buried in the cold Martian dust where death belongs, not here, with nowhere to hide his vile contamination except in the pure flesh of the living.

He raised his riven face and the dead leaves stuck to it. Wearily he brushed them off with his remaining hand. He smelt his own decay as the tissue broke again, letting out the seeping filth. The waves of burning nausea rose from the pit of his stomach and he retched caustic.

Dear God, where could he hide?

Ted Nelson's voice had been like a lost melody. How he'd desperately longed to answer, to hand himself over to the doctor's care. But it was too late. When they'd dearly needed help up there on the red planet, there'd been no one. It had got at their radio, snapped the one life-line that anchored them to humanity. And when they'd drifted loose (it was so easy out there amongst the stars), it had been ready, waiting for them. If only that call had come the moment they'd landed.

His instincts had told him there was something wrong about the storm. But he hadn't been trained to follow his instincts. They'd been taught a procedure in the event of a dust storm, to sit it out on board the module and then continue with the exploration when it had moved off. No one had mentioned the fear. No one had taught him what to do when fear broke loose from the locked confines of his trained mind and became as real and tangible as rocket failure.

So he'd ignored the message of the sand, drummed out on the hull of the module. He'd ignored the warning left at the door, wet and warm like blood. Even the radiation, antipathy of life: they'd put on their suits and stepped past it.

They'd set foot on the planet of ashes like sailors on a plague ship.

He was to blame. Against the dictates of his real self he'd led them out there. Blind science had gone hand in hand with commercial greed and military prestige. These were the false gods that had persuaded him to tread where no sane creature with all

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his live and healthy senses would ever have gone. And for the sin of such arrogance and stupidity all humanity would be made to suffer.

He could not answer Ted Nelson's call. While the torn vestiges of humanity still clung to him he must hide, hide while he could until the red rage struck again and drove him to his hideous crimes.

He looked down at the swollen hand, deformed beyond recognition, and saw the blood beneath the nails. It was not his blood.

He groaned with the weight of his guilt, throwing himself back on to the ground. He felt the cool earth on his burning face. Around him nature thrived, trees full of birdsong and leaves quivering with green life. But he was filthy with death. The flies crawled over his body, drank deep from his festering wounds, then fell off bloated with poison. He was Beelzebub, lord of the flies, the Devil come from the stars to punish mankind with everlasting death.

He thought of the little girl. What had she seen to cauterise her infant mind until the day she died? He'd not yet seen his face, only its horror reflected in the soul of innocence, in blue eyes fragile as flowers. They'd told him he was beyond all help, even if he should wish it. He was the Devil let loose to terrorise the living. Who could bear to look at him?

There was only one way. He was not the Devil but Judas. He did not exult in the betrayal of humanity but could only suffer in the knowledge of his guilt. Now, while the alien cells were still, before they shrieked again for food, he must kill himself.

He stumbled to his feet, smothered now in dead leaves. Cradling his purpose, his one remaining grain of human independence, he set off back towards the river. In the cool clean waters he would drown the burning hatred and purge his guilt. In the river lay his salvation.

Laughter snared him. Carefree laughter like a silver bell rang out through the trees. It sang of beauty, youth, and happiness, and the alien cells heard it. They stiffened and trembled under the rotting skin in hungry anticipation. His precious grain was spilt.

He crouched like an animal close to the earth and watched.

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Bubbles of mucus burst from the corners of his mouth as the pained breathing quickened. He was almost invisible in his suit of leaves.

A young woman swept through the trees and came into his field of view. She was beautiful and enjoying every minute of it. Not in a vain coquettish sort of way, but in innocent exuberance. She found a small glade where the sunlight danced, and swirled round. Her skirt swelled into a reel of gay colours and her long dark hair spilled outwards, trapping strands of golden sunlight. Then she sat down on a mossy log and began running her fingers through the soft grass. Her green eyes sparkled with happiness.

A man's voice, betraying impatience, called out from within the wood.

'Sandra. Where are you?'

Again the peel of silver laughter as she threw back her head and called.

'Over here.'

The man emerged, looking hot and bad-tempered. He had a camera slung round his neck. He was dressed in denim, his shirt very wide open at the neck where he sported a number of silver chains. Another assortment was round both wrists. He wore tinted glasses and a drooping brown moustache, slightly darker than his hair which had a pale highlight at one side. He looked to be in his late thirties, but may have been younger; the trendy, somewhat degenerate cliché of his appearance was misleading. He had a peevish voice.

'Now come on, doll, stop goofing around and let's take these pictures.'

The girl became self-conscious in his presence and her manner became affected. She arched her back and let the sunlight fall full on her face.

'Isn't it heavenly,' she cried, screwing up her eyes. 'If you half-close your eyes it just melts into a green, green world.'

The man scowled impatiently.

'OK, honey,' he drawled. 'Quit the kid's stuff. I want some sophisticated snaps.'

She opened her eyes and looked at him with a worried frown. She was no more than seventeen. Eighteen at the most,

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'Don't you think I'm sophisticated, Charles?' she asked.

Charles's manner changed. 'Of course I do, honey. Real sophisticated,' he flattered. 'That's why we're here to take pictures.'

The girl looked a lot happier.

'All right,' she smiled. 'Let's start. How about one with me sitting here?'

The man's face clouded for a second, but he soon covered it up.

'OK now,' he said unenthusiastically and began pretending to take some shots. The girl thought they were for real.

'How about something a bit different now?' he announced, coming closer to her. Behind the tinted glasses the eyes were sharp and restless. 'Can you draw your skirt up a little bit?' he wheedled.

The girl looked shocked. 'What's wrong with my skirt?' she demanded.

'There's nothing wrong with your skirt, honey,' soothed the photographer. 'It's just that I'd like to see a bit more of those pretty legs of yours.'

The girl was not impressed by his flattery.

'You said that about my face. I thought it was for one of those nice calendars, where you just show their faces.'

Charles's smile was growing very thin. 'It is for a calendar, sweetheart. But we take all of you and decide how much to leave on. If your legs are just as pretty as your face, we like to leave both on. OK?'

'OK,' agreed Sandra reluctantly and hitched up her skirt to just below the knee.

'Can we see your knees?' drawled Charles impatiently. 'This is not New England last century.'

She hesitated, unhappy with the situation.

'Look here, doll,' he said. 'I'm a busy man. There are plenty of other girls who'd jump at the chance of appearing in our magazine.'

'Magazine?' started the girl. 'I thought you said it was a calendar.'

Charles shrugged, rattling his assortment of silverware. 'Magazines, calendars. What's the difference?'

'You mean it's for one of *those* magazines?' cried the girl, genuinely shocked.

'What do you goddam think it's for?' shouted Charles, dropping all pretence. 'A bloody chocolate box?'

He approached her menacingly.

'And while you're at it,' he snarled. 'You can unfasten that blouse. We wanna see something of you. And I don't mean just that goddam innocent face.'

He tore at the buttons on her blouse and she let out a terrified scream, struggling wildly as he attempted to molest her.

Drawn by the sound and smell of fear, the thing rose from the bushes. Hunger and resentment burned in the swollen red eyes. He stood, a battlefield of warring impulses. The blood-lust beat against him like an angry tide, pushing him mercilessly to murder, to appease the drumming of the craving cells. But even as he rose in his wrath, a tiny piece of jetsam braved the tide, salvaged from the wreckage of his old self. Pity for the beautiful girl checked the rage and turned the indiscriminate anger on the man, symbol of his own corrupt self, a despoiler of innocence, beauty and life.

Yet he hesitated for the girl's sake. Recalling the blue eyes of the small child as they froze in terror, he faltered, loath to expose his vileness again. Beauty and innocence spoke to his soul, and a small part that was still uninfected replied and checked the alien rage.

And it was enough to save her. Out of the wood came sounds of whistles being blown and men shouting. The search party had heard her screams and was rapidly converging on the spot.

The man turned guiltily as the first white-coated technician arrived. The girl clutched her torn blouse anxiously to her and looked appealingly at her rescuer. The technician's disappointment changed to irritation when he read the situation. Other staff from the research centre were also arriving.

'You shouldn't be here,' shouted the technician. 'It's private property.'

The photographer had regained his composure and began arguing. Unseen by any of them, the thing crept away into the wood.

Once out of earshot he began to run, swiftly but unsteadily

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so that he lunged against overhanging branches and they plucked at his skin, leaving thin nets of glistening slime like spiders' webs hanging from the leaves. A black cloud of flies pursued him, buzzing greedily around his head. As he ran his breathing grew more pained. Between the gasps came tight sobs of despair. He was weeping for the girl. The image of her beauty had lodged in his decaying brain and it hurt more than the searing pain in his body.

He burst through the trees into an opening. There was a flap of panicked wing-beats as a flock of mallards rose in noisy consternation from the surface of a small pond. They rose like arrows towards the sunlight, leaving the water rippling and dancing between the green circles of water-lilies.

He crept towards the edge and peered over the side into the turbulent water. As the ripples settled he saw his reflection.

He let out a bellow of anguish and brought his deformed hand down upon the image, splintering it into a thousand fragments of bobbing sunlight. He beat again and again, trying to hammer it down into the red mud at the bottom of the pond where it belonged. Then he hurled himself after it, gulping at the liquid in a bid to douse the unquenchable fire in his guts. He threshed and floundered in the water, but it wasn't deep enough to hide him. His lungs burnt fiercer as they filled with water and vomited themselves clear in a spasm of agonised retching.

He raised himself, the red and muddy water cascading from his body. The dead leaves, still glistening from contact with his melting skin, floated limply about him. The water had scorned and rejected his miserable life and the fire raged stronger within, fanned by the flames of bitter resentment.

He shook himself like an animal and padded off in search of food.

FIVE

'Well?' he barked. 'Where is he?'

'I'm afraid we still haven't found him,' stammered the doctor. 'At least, not all of him,' he added bitterly.

'What's that supposed to mean?' demanded the General venomously.

The doctor explained about the hand.

'When did you find it?' asked the General sharply.

'Just over an hour ago in the wood beyond the airstrip. We've still got it surrounded.'

For the first time the General relaxed. 'Then he'll be dead now,' he said coolly. 'We don't need to worry about him any more.'

Ted Nelson disguised his disgust at this piece of ruthlessness. 'I'm afraid the hand's probably only been shed, as a failure,' he replied. 'The organism's probably at work on other tissue. Next time it could be more successful.'

The iron disdain came back into the General's voice. 'Organism?' he snarled. 'What organism? What are you trying to say, Nelson?'

'Only that Doctor Loring and I believe that Steve West's body has been invaded by an alien life form. That it's experimenting on him just as we might experiment with tissue culture, finding the right conditions for breeding. While it does so it's able to control his behaviour. That's why he keeps killing: to ensure new supplies of protoplasmic material for the host to survive and grow.'

'Keeps killing?' exploded the General. 'You mean he's killed again?'

Ted almost enjoyed the panic this revelation produced in this bullying parody of a militarist. That he could welcome Steve's death was contemptible.

'How many men have you got surrounding the wood?' demanded the General after listening grimly to the story of the discovery of the fisherman's body.

Ted explained how every available man on the base was involved in the hunt as well as the ones the police had brought in. The General glanced at his watch, then glowered darkly out of the window at the sky.

'We must fly more men in from Hale, at once. Armed. And

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we want as many searchlights as possible, it'll be dark in a couple of hours. Time is running out.'

'Time?' repeated Nelson in surprise. 'You can't be intending to go ahead with the launch?'

The General's stocky frame stiffened even more. The hard pale eyes betrayed no feeling.

'The launch is to go ahead. Nothing will be allowed to interfere with it.'

Ted Nelson was aghast. 'But at least delay it until we've had a chance to develop a serum. We can't send anyone else up there until we're sure they're immune. It would amount to murder, knowing what we know.'

'What *who* knows, Nelson?' challenged the General. 'What you've told me is all conjecture. And pretty fantastical conjecture at that. We've sent five unmanned probes to Mars and we know for certain the planet's as dead as a dodo. Now you come up with this ridiculous theory of alien life forms. It's minerals not Martians we're looking for up there, Doctor Nelson. As well as a hell of a lot of international prestige, there's also billions of dollars of unclaimed mineral rights at stake in this programme. That's before we start to list the military advantages.' He jabbed a short, thick finger at him. 'Are you asking me to give up all that and postpone Prometheus Two because of some spaceman who's flipped his lid because he couldn't stand up to the strain of a few months in space? Well?'

'The other two died,' pointed out the doctor coldly. 'I watched them.'

'Yes,' retorted the General. 'And have you found out what they died of yet? When you come up with something definite, some complaint we've all heard of, then you can expect me to take some notice. But you can't expect me to tell the President the mission's been cancelled because some boffin has got a crazy notion about little green men carrying out experiments on our astronauts.'

He raised a fat hand, interrupting the doctor's protests. 'Now, Nelson, if we can get on with the business of catching this man.' He glanced critically round the room. 'This will be the operation centre. Tell your staff I'll be taking over here. And before you leave see that I'm sent a map of the area. And I want a field

telephone installed. Who's in charge out there in the wood?' Nelson mentioned the name of one of his senior assistants.

'Right,' ordered the General. 'Get him relieved and have him sent here for briefing. You'd better get back to your lab.'

The General picked up the phone and began barking instructions at the office staff. The army had taken over.

Ted turned wearily on his heels and made his way quietly back to the lab.

It was a more chastened General Perry who joined him in the lab an hour later. The sun was setting, inflaming the whole western horizon.

'We lost the son of a bitch,' he swore bitterly. 'God knows how, but he somehow slipped through the net.'

He stared gloomily out of the window. 'He's going to be out there all night on the rampage if we don't get a break soon and spot him.' He looked over Ted Nelson's shoulder at the slides he was examining. 'Any luck yourself, Doc?'

Nelson shook his head. 'No, but I'm hopeful. The hand we found contained a number of living cells. Loring's busy at the moment preparing some cultures. We may be on the way to finding out more about the cells that have invaded West's body.'

The phone rang and the General grabbed the receiver. His brusque manner evaporated and he began to ooze charm. Eventually he handed the receiver over to Ted.

'It's your wife, Doctor Nelson,' he said in a more friendly voice.

Judy wanted to know what time he'd be back for dinner. And he hadn't forgotten that her mother and Harold were coming, had he?

He had and he groaned at the prospect. He was dog tired and didn't want to be bothered with a couple of middle-aged love-birds. It was bad enough having to cope with Perry.

Was the General coming for dinner? Judy asked brightly. Ted passed on the invitation and again groaned inwardly at the readiness with which it was accepted.

Before she rang off she again mentioned her mother. She was rather worried about them. They were late and it was unlike

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them. Nothing could have happened to them in that old car of theirs, could it?

Ted did his best to settle her mind. He felt sure there was some perfectly harmless reason for them to be delayed and she wasn't to worry.

He put down the phone and became conscious of his headache again. As if he hadn't enough to worry about with Steve loose, without having to get worked up about a couple of star-struck sixty-year-olds.

The wounded sun sank behind the horizon, splashing the sky with crimson. Livid streaks of yellow lit the west and overhead the darkness gathered. Stars were already boring tiny glittering holes in the blue-black bowl of the sky.

Somewhere the red planet crept invisibly towards the horizon and the borrowed light of the dying sun.

An owl slid noiselessly through the thickening light, powered by the silent gnawing of hunger. Hidden birds fluttered and shuffled uneasily as they settled to roost in the lemon trees. A dog barked a sharp warning and growled fretfully.

Slowly, a pale moon edged its way into the sky, a furtive witness to the night's events. Two eyes watched it anxiously. The fire of the dead sun glowed there, fuelled by the unquenchable thirst that beat up from within and burst in choking waves on the ragged edges of his mouth.

The eyes continued to stare, unblinking because the lids had melted away. Only the broken memories stirred, locked in the fevered chamber behind the dying eyes.

The barren desert lay all before them, red dust stretching as far as the mauve horizon where the galaxies spun and mocked. It was a bleak inheritance for the sky children.

They argued amongst themselves about who was to step down first. There seemed to be no point in standing on ceremony with radio contact dead and the formalities of earth so far away. It was a joy to pit their bodies against gravity again, flex their muscles against solid rock. Too long they'd floated like jellies

in the weightlessness of space. And the air, though niggardly and thin, stretched about them boundlessly, so that they felt like creatures with an environment at last and not just specimens corked up in a jar.

They danced and played like children, leaping high into the air, hugging one another in congratulations, as much as their space-suits would allow. And when they'd tired of rediscovering the joy of their bodies, they stood in silence while their minds went out to the tiny blue star on the horizon that was their home.

They'd begun their collection of rock and mineral samples right away, working in the cold Martian silence, waving often at each other when the pressure of loneliness or fear threatened to overwhelm them. The satellite Deimos was always above them, glinting palely like a jagged skull in the dark blue sky.

The most exciting discovery of all had come to welcome them. The strange red substance that had seemed to spread when they opened the airlock appeared to be some form of dormant life. When they'd opened the hatch and the Martian air had entered the lock it had been stifled and had hardened like crisp red lichen. The incredible suggestion that it was waiting only for the right conditions, the ones they'd brought with them, occupied all their thoughts. It had ceased to become radioactive the moment it had hardened, and traces were found outside on the hull of the module which Steve carefully scraped off and stored in a vacuum flask.

The failure of the radio was a complete mystery. They'd had the equipment to pieces and could find nothing wrong with it. It was obviously working at short range because they were getting audio data from the computer in the ship orbiting above the planet's surface. But contact with mission control was broken. For all that Earth knew, they might be dead. The world would have to wait until they carried their discovery back with them.

On the first night the storm returned. They lay in

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their sleeping quarters listening to the sand scratching away at the hull. It was unnerving. By day the planet had been so still, vast tracts of uninhabited desert, nothing to break the progress of the eye to the distant horizon except the occasional outcrop of rock. Now, out of nothing, came the wind, scuttling along the dry floor like an army of dessicated claws and running all over the outside of the ship, exploring. It brought tension, and bad dreams.

He dreamt he'd awakened with a burning thirst. He'd been caught in the sandstorm and nothing he could do could prevent the choking sand getting into his nose and mouth. He reached for a flask of water, put it to his lips and to his horror watched a red fluid creep down the neck into his mouth. He was paralysed and could do nothing as the viscid slime seeped into his throat. It cauterised his insides like concentrated acid and he screamed like a man consumed by fire. His whole body had begun to melt.

The thing squirmed in agony there in the lemon grove. The gaunt eyes rolled in terror at the stain in the sky and with his one distended hand he clawed at his throat, trying to beat out the fire within. Like a man trying to learn to use a calliper he waved the dripping stump that had been the other hand pathetically over his eyes trying to drive away the image that burnt there. And in the dark amongst the bitter fruits the mutant cells shrieked to be fed.

'Come on,' coaxed an elderly female voice. 'It's quite safe. No one'll see us.'

It had been Helen's idea and she ordered Harold to stop the old Buick at the roadside.

'We'll just nip over the fence and grab a few. She can make a lemon meringue pie. She'll love that.'

Harold peered anxiously down the road into the darkness. It was different when you were a kid, but when you're nearly seventy. Imagine what the judge would say!

'If you have to give her a present, why can't we buy her some

candy at a drugstore?' he protested. 'There's bound to be one open somewhere.'

'Judy shouldn't eat candy while she's pregnant,' insisted the woman. 'Lemons will do her good.' She nudged her boyfriend and pinched his arm. 'And stolen lemons will taste good. Stolen things always do.'

They seemed to share a secret joke in this and both began to laugh. Harold was persuaded and they climbed out of the car and moved towards the fence.

'What are we going to put them in?' whispered Harold.

Helen archly lifted her skirt, making a cradle for them with the material.

'Here,' she announced, pleased with herself.

Harold caught hold of her and kissed her.

'Not now, you naughty old man,' she whispered coyly. 'Later, when we've picked the lemons.'

He gallantly held up the wire of the fence while she ducked through. He followed her, but as he bent his knee joint gave a loud crack. They both melted in a fit of giggles like school-children.

'Sh!' scolded Helen, when she'd recovered. 'Someone'll hear us.'

They walked hand in hand down a narrow clearing between the trees. The young moon seemed to smile down on them. Helen rested her head on his shoulder and for a while they just sauntered along oblivious of everything but each other.

Harold stared wistfully up at the moon. 'Your Judy's husband has something to do with that, doesn't he?' he asked eventually.

'With what?' asked Helen dreamily.

'With sending people to the moon.'

Helen murmured softly and Harold continued with his train of thought.

'Shouldn't be allowed,' he complained.

'Why not?' asked Helen, who couldn't believe that anything could be wrong on an evening like this.

'It spoils the romance,' he said. 'The moon is just for lovers like you and me.'

Helen snuggled closer. 'Lovers indeed!' she chided gently,

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longing to hear more. 'Who said anything about lovers? We're just a couple of moon-struck old codgers. We passed that sort of thing long ago.'

Harold tightened his grip on her waist. 'Who's past it?' he said, blowing gently on her neck. 'Not me.'

Helen sighed contentedly and they ambled on.

A faint stirring came from the bushes beyond the trees.

Harold stopped. 'What was that?' he whispered. They both listened.

'I heard nothing,' said Helen, fitting his arm round her waist again. 'Go on telling me about—about the moon.'

Harold had grown nervous, but he allowed Helen's mood to soothe him.

'I think it's wrong of them to send men to the moon,' he said. 'I like to think of it all empty up there, mysterious. Men spoil things, they mess things up. We've made a big enough mess of things down here without going into space to contaminate things.'

Helen thought about this. 'I don't think our Ted would allow that sort of thing to happen,' she said. 'Judy says he's very conscientious. She says he spends a lot of time worrying about his work. Take this recent trip—'

Sh!' interrupted Harold. 'There it is again.'

They both strained to catch the sound. The bushes were stirring again.

'It's only the wind in the trees,' said Helen. 'Why are you so nervous?' She giggled. 'It's because you're not used to being alone in the dark with me. That's it, isn't it?'

But Harold's body was rigid. On the breeze came a panting sound. This time Helen heard it.

'Come on,' urged Harold. 'Let's get out of here.'

He grabbed Helen by the arm and pushed her in front of him. In that moment a shadow rose out of the bushes emitting a savage snarl.

They ran frantically through the trees. Their pursuer seemed to hug the ground, remaining concealed, only a dark panting shape blundering noisily through the undergrowth. They ran like they'd never run, hearts in their throats.

He pushed her through the fence. As he followed, ducking

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low under the wire, it emerged from the shadows and sprang at him. A dark shape hit the fence and he felt hot breath on his face. As he twisted his body out of the way he heard the snap of teeth coming together. Then it seemed to become ensnared in the wire.

Helen had the car door open for him and he scrambled into the seat beside her. As he slammed the door the dog disentangled itself from the fence and leapt up at the window. It bared its teeth at them and began to bark noisily. Harold revved up the engine and roared off, leaving the creature to chase after the car for a few yards before stopping in the road, returning, and sniffing curiously at the spot where the car had been parked. Then it disappeared quickly back into the orchard.

They collapsed in nervous laughter and relief.

‘A bloody guard dog,’ shouted Harold. ‘I wondered what the hell was after us.’ He laughed loudly. ‘He must have been a bit long in the tooth not to catch up with us.’

‘You speak for yourself, Harold O’Brien,’ wheezed Helen. ‘You were miles behind. If it hadn’t been for me getting the door open in time, you’d have been torn to shreds.’

Harold chortled and glanced into the rear mirror to see what had become of the dog.

Two swollen red eyes watched him, unblinking.

SIX

THE JOINT parted with a snap and as it twisted there was the creak of tearing gristle. It came suddenly loose in a spurt of hot juice, bringing with it the skin which stripped bare the white flesh of the breast.

'A leg, General?' invited Judy as she held the chicken above the plate.

The General nodded hungrily. He was ravenous after his spell in the fresh air. It made a welcome change from being stuck behind an office desk. Pity they couldn't organise an operation like it every day, provided they could finish off with a meal like this to come back to. He grunted happily as he swamped his plate in rich brown gravy and set to.

Ted ate sparingly and Judy not at all. The doctor was too tired to eat and his wife too worried about the two empty places at table. Where could Mom and Harold have got to? she thought miserably. An accident? He was getting much too old to handle a big car like that, and it wasn't a bit reliable.

She excused herself once more and went to the telephone. Again there was no answer from the apartment.

She walked disconsolately back to the table and sat down. Ted reached for her hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze. She smiled back at him weakly.

'Super, Mrs Nelson. Or can I call you Judy?' called the General from behind a mouthful of food. His lips glistened with chicken fat.

Judy smiled politely and offered him another helping of chicken. He accepted readily. More corn and gravy followed. She felt ill watching him shovel it away.

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Her self-control suddenly broke. She stood up from the table, tears in her eyes. Ted was at her side in an instant.

‘What’s the matter, love?’ he asked.

The bones of her fingers gleamed white as she pressed her hands against her face in distraction.

‘I’m sorry,’ she apologised. ‘It’s just . . . well, first Steve, and now my mother. I just can’t take it, Ted.’

General Perry had put down his knife and fork. A trickle of grease ran down his chin.

‘What about Steve, Mrs Nelson?’ he demanded.

Ted protested, but the General interrupted him.

‘Doctor Nelson,’ he said, puffing out his chest so that his napkin fell to the floor, ‘in an emergency like this you’re under my direct command. I thought I’d made it clear that this operation was strictly classified and that no information was to be divulged to anyone.’

Ted was coldly furious. ‘For Christ’s sake, she’s my wife.’

‘That does not exclude her from my orders.’

‘Sod your orders!’

The General’s face turned red. The glistening droplet of fat shook on his chin. ‘I could have you up on charges for this, Nelson.’

They stood confronting one another, Judy looking on in amazement, almost on the point of hysteria.

The door bell rang. Judy dashed out of the room and flung open the front door. Her flood of relief was checked. It congealed to panic when she saw the uniformed figure of a police officer.

‘Oh, no!’ she cried.

‘I’m afraid you must prepare yourself for some bad news,’ began the officer.

Ted was just in time to catch his wife as her knees buckled and she fell to the floor.

After putting his wife under sedation and leaving her asleep in bed, Nelson followed the General out to the police car. As they joined the highway he could see the lights of the lab burning in the distance where Loring continued with their work. He prayed to God he’d find something. There were less than

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eleven hours before the launch. And now this had to happen.

The car had travelled less than a mile from the base when they rounded a bend and saw the flashing warning lights of the accident unit. Harold's Buick was in the ditch at the roadside. The headlights still burned.

The police had touched nothing. The gory feast was just as the thing had left it. In the road was an arm, gnawed through to the bone. Ted recognised a charm bracelet that still hung round the wrist.

The interior was like an abattoir run by amateurs. Blood was splattered everywhere and still trickled down the windows. The flies had smelt it and were having a field-day. The torn carcasses of the two ageing lovers were scattered about the leather upholstery, shining with slime as if a huge slug had squatted on them. The air reeked of the warm sweetish smell of blood mingled with the sweat of panic.

Nelson had to walk away and lean on the roadside fence, fighting down the nausea that welled up in his stomach. Steve had been a friend, he kept telling himself. If they ever had a baby, Steve was to have been the godfather. They'd been thinking of asking him as soon as he got back from the flight.

He looked at the moon as it rose above the branches of the lemon trees. It was a pale rictus. What, in the name of compassion, had gone on out there to turn a gentle civilised man into a demented beast? What fury had possessed him?

Mars the god of war, with his attendants Fear and Panic, Deimos and Phobos, trailing havoc and destruction across the skies. Had the ancient astronomers who named the planet had some dreadful premonition? For hours he'd studied the pictures from the unmanned probes to prepare the crew for what to expect. He'd seen only the red desert, cold and dead. He thought of the huge amoeba-like cells they'd found on the nurse's body. Somewhere amongst all that lifeless dust, they'd been waiting. Only Steve remained to tell them how it had happened, what they'd met during their long radio silence.

But it was growing more hopeless by the minute. The appalling mutilation of the two old folk shrieked of just how hopeless. He'd never been very close to Helen; they'd had their differences. But lately, since she'd met Harold, she'd been

so much better. She'd found the happiness that had eluded her in earlier life. And she'd been so excited about the baby. Judy had called her Gran the other day.

He groaned aloud when he thought of his wife. Poor Judy, she was never going to be able to take this, never. And she was sure to get to know that it was Steve who did it. They couldn't keep it quiet much longer.

He felt a gentle tap on his shoulder. It was the sheriff, looking pale and grim.

'A bad business, Doc,' he said. 'I'm very sorry.'

Blake moved closer, lowering his voice.

'Listen, Doc,' he said. 'You'd better tell me what's going on around here, before there's no one left in this town.'

Nelson looked nervously over his shoulder towards the car and the figure of the General.

'I can't do that, Neil,' he replied. 'It's classified.'

The sheriff's face hardened.

'People are dying with the most terrible wounds and you give me that official line. What is this, Doctor Nelson?' He laid heavy emphasis on the word 'doctor' so that Nelson winced with the barb of his sarcasm.

'Look, Neil,' pleaded Nelson, again glancing towards the General. 'Can't you see I've got my hands tied?'

'You need them handcuffing,' hissed the sheriff.

'Why?' protested Nelson.

'Because for two pins I'd run you in for aiding and abetting a criminal.'

'Criminal? There's no criminal.'

'Then who the bloody hell did this?' exploded Blake.

The General was casting suspicious glances in their direction as Blake's angry voice reached him.

Nelson felt sick. Why should he carry on this stupid game any longer? It was time people knew the truth, that the mission had been a disaster. Keeping the astronauts in quarantine all that time with bogus medical reports. Covering up the fact that two of them had died. Pretending that Prometheus Two would be a success. He was sick of being an accomplice to a con trick that pulled the wool over the world's eyes and pretended that the great American space programme was infallible. It only safe-

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guarded the jobs of pompous and dangerous idiots like Perry who were prepared to risk lives, more lives than they knew, for their own selfish ends. No, he'd had enough. Let Perry carry on the pretence from now on.

'Look, Sheriff,' Nelson said stiffly, making sure his voice would carry as far as the General. 'If you want to know any more answers I think you'd better have a word with the General.'

It brought Perry over right away. Nelson introduced them and stood politely and silently aside.

Blake was still angry and shocked enough about what had happened in his own town to be unintimidated by the military man's lofty status.

'What brings you down here on the eve of the launch, General?' he asked bluntly.

'It's a security matter, I'm afraid,' replied the General blandly.

'And are they a security matter?' asked Blake, pointing towards the bodies in the Buick. He made no effort to disguise his anger.

The General was at a momentary loss. 'I suppose you could say so,' he said shakily.

'Then since I'm in charge of the security of the people of this town and they were two of its citizens, do you mind telling me where I come into your security arrangements?'

Blake was a good six inches taller than the General and despite his slighter build he towered over him menacingly.

Again Nelson found himself extracting a perverse delight from the situation, and the General's discomfiture. Perry was in a genuine dilemma. He couldn't put the town under martial law until the troops arrived from Hale. At the moment he was the only soldier here. He'd need the sheriff's co-operation for at least the next hour until they came.

The General gave Nelson a steady look and drew the sheriff aside. Nelson overheard something about having the situation under control before they disappeared from earshot.

Ted Nelson stared bleakly at the Buick as he digested this piece of information. The sublime irony was that they'd taken the most exhaustive precautions to sterilise all the machinery

and equipment on the Mars mission to avoid any contamination of the planet by earth-born bacteria. But apart from routine medical checks there'd been nothing in their planning to guard against bringing anything back. All that care over a dead planet, and next to nothing for the living. It was monstrous folly.

His two-way radio interrupted his bitter reflections. It was Dick Loring. Would Nelson come down to the lab as soon as possible; there was something he should see.

He left a message for the General and got one of the policemen to run him back. He was anxious to be near Judy. She mustn't be left alone after what had happened.

The sedative had only been a mild one and Judy had awoken to find the house empty. She was in a state of confusion because of the effects of the drug and had wandered sleepily downstairs.

She was sitting in the lounge staring vacantly at the window. The curtains were undrawn but the venetian blinds were half closed, allowing thin bands of light to shine out into the garden. Her eyes followed the light but she saw nothing. She was thinking of Steve.

He somehow seemed to be the focus of their tragedy. She'd closed her mind to her mother. She knew something awful had happened but she couldn't bring herself to look at it. Instead it was Steve who occupied her thoughts. Again she knew no details, only that he was desperately ill and that his illness had imperilled the future of the programme.

She wished she could have gone to him and comforted him, lying alone in an isolation ward fighting for his life. He was a guinea-pig to the rest of them, even to her husband: Ted couldn't help that, it was his job. But what Steve most needed they couldn't give him. She'd tried before the mission. She'd tried to provide some of the things he'd missed since his wife was killed: inviting him round for some of her home cooking, repairing his clothes, listening when the strain of the job was too much for him—all the feminine things that came so easily to her and made all the difference to a life. But now he was locked away from her while people like that absurd General Perry huffed and puffed about security. Poor Steve!

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Poor Steve stood outside in the garden looking in at her.

Mars was like that, only it hadn't lasted. He'd watched the small blue star that was Earth, with its smaller, paler twin locked next to it, and he'd felt like an out-cast for a while. But then the sheer immensity of the gulf that separated them from Earth began to tell. It began to represent an abdication from humanity. He grew silent and withdrawn from the others. Away from the ship he began to break the rules and encourage the others to do the same. He began to drift further away, lost in his private world. For it was a megalomania that had afflicted him. Something he'd had no training for, no warning about. It was exposure to the vastness and emptiness that had brought it on. And it was exhilarating. Like being the first of creation. Like being God.

There was nothing to engage the eye and mind in the monotony of the desert landscape. But up there in the deep blue twilight where the stars of the galaxy were strewn like a million flawless pearls. Ah! That was different.

His heart and mind were always drawn further into space. It was like standing on the sea-shore looking out at an island. You must go there. And when you'd arrived and there was another island beyond, again you couldn't rest until you'd journeyed there. And so on, out to the furthestmost islands of space. Earth dwindled to insignificance in the thirst for conquest. They were the first of a new species that had turned its back on Earth. He felt new affinities stirring.

That was how the misadventure had happened. They'd left the module that morning on routine exploration. As usual he'd separated from the others. He'd infected them with his indifference for sticking to the schedules. If the radio had been working it would have been different. But the umbilical cord with humanity had snapped. They took specimen bags and tools with them only for appearances.

He'd wandered up on to one of the few rock masses that rose out of the desert. It was only two or three hundred feet high, but it took him a step nearer the edge so that he could spend the day looking out into the cold void.

How long he'd been there he didn't know. Time began not to matter. He'd seen a meteor drawn into the thin atmosphere of the planet and he followed the burning tail to its destruction. It had brought his gaze groundwards, and he suddenly became aware of a movement on the horizon. At first he thought it was a trick of the weak sunlight and as he stared the strain made him think it was his own eye, following the movement of its watery fluid. But it was growing quickly, as though the desert itself was being rolled up like a giant carpet.

It was a dust storm sweeping towards him at an incredible speed.

He panicked, driven by the fear of his nightmare when he'd lain in the module that first night and listened to the claws scraping on the hull. In giant gravity-free bounds he leapt down from the rocks, stumbling against their jagged surfaces, risking the precious skin of his space suit. But he could see the module nowhere and the storm was advancing in eerie silence across the red desert.

The exertion was causing his helmet to steam up and his vision to blur. A last despairing glance over his shoulder and the sky, his universe, was obliterated by a vast red cloud.

The outstretched fingers of the storm began to pluck at his suit, hungrily.

Judy gradually became aware of a movement behind the venetian blinds. Someone outside was waving, strange clawing movements in the air as if trying to fend off an assailant. It must be Ted, she thought, trying to attract her attention. He'd forgotten his key.

She hurried to the front door. Through the frosted glass she

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made out a dark shape waiting to be let in. She fumbled with the key in her drowsy state, and the movements behind the glass became more and more frenzied.

She opened the door and it was the General. He wasn't looking at her but was staring in horror beyond the door. A strange gasping sound came from the darkness. She stepped out to see what it was but the General pushed her back inside.

'Lock the door again, for God's sake!' he shouted.

As the door slammed she heard a grunt of pain come from the General. A larger, darker shape had moved in front of the glass, a huge distended arm like a claw raised above its head. It brought it down again and again on the shape that was the General until the sounds of pain were silenced.

She dashed to the phone. Her fingers trembled so much she could hardly dial the number. Her husband answered.

'Something's outside,' she gasped. 'It's got the General. I think it's—'

Ted didn't let her finish. 'Lock yourself in the bathroom,' he cried. 'I'm on my way.'

As she crept past the front door to the foot of the stairs, the sound of struggling had subsided. She listened. A strange slobbering sound came to her ears, punctuated by awful pained breathing.

She fled upstairs clutching her stomach in agony.

As the thing slaked its unquenchable thirst another storm raged in the cold twilight of the red planet. At its still centre something grew stronger and wiser, exulting in its new knowledge and the greater strength yet to come.

SEVEN

THE CELLS swam through the solution with incredible speed. A tendril of cytoplasm stretched out in front like an arm, probing hungrily. It seemed to know where the red cells were by instinct, and when the snaking tendril touched a corpuscle, like lightning the body of the cell surrounded it. It was ingested in a moment. Before their eyes they watched the blood cell melt as the invisible enzymes attacked. Then the huge nucleus convulsed as it absorbed the new protoplasm. It had grown perceptibly and the alien cell was off again on its insatiable quest for more food.

'My God!' cried Ted Nelson as he watched the process Loring had filmed. 'Are you sure you've got the speed right?'

Loring nodded. 'Quite sure,' he replied calmly.

'But it's incredible,' went on the doctor. 'I've never seen anything as voracious. It's frightening. You say it's from the hand?'

Again Loring nodded, reaching for a plate.

'But this is even more remarkable,' he said. 'I haven't been able to film this, but I'm still trying. It's on a couple of the photographic plates. Look.'

He handed the plate to his colleague. 'Now what do you make of that?'

It was an electron microscope photograph of one of the cells. From the nucleus to the edge of the plate ran a straight line, dark and etched deep into the plate.

The doctor studied it carefully. Loring was sufficient of a skilled cytologist not to have allowed any foreign material on to his slides. The only other explanation was a defective plate. He quizzed his assistant about this.

'Chances of stray gamma radiation doing that are a million to one,' said Loring. The doctor interrupted him.

'Radiation?' he cried. 'You mean this is the radiation we've been picking up and it's coming from the nucleus of the alien cell?' He was aghast.

'Somehow the nucleus is emitting short wave radiation,' said Loring. 'What kind of radiation, I don't know. I've rushed a plate down to the High Energy Physics lab at Overton to be examined. We should know within a few hours; they're working on it now.'

'But radiation's going to damage living tissue,' argued the doctor. 'A radioactive cell nucleus is an impossibility.'

'I'd have thought so until I saw this,' agreed Loring. 'But this is a very special case. Look at the massive chromosome content. Imagine the extent of the genetic information contained there. There's enough for a whole species, not just an individual.'

As they tried to absorb the implications of their discovery neither of them spoke. Only the remorseless ticking of the clock broke the silence of the lab.

'Another thing that's been worrying me,' went on Loring eventually. 'I must have examined hundreds of them and not one has started to divide. It's as though they weren't ready, either weren't big enough, or the conditions in which they find themselves aren't right for development.'

'Which is maybe why the hand was shed,' interrupted Nelson.

'Precisely,' agreed Loring. 'That's why I think we ought to help them.'

The assistant ignored the look of consternation that spread across the doctor's tired face.

'It's our only way of finding out what we're dealing with,' Loring insisted. 'I suggest we prepare a variety of media to try and cultivate what remain of the cells from the hand. If we use different human tissue we can have a control experiment which will tell us here in the lab what's happening to Steve. Put bluntly, we'll know what he's turning into without ending up like Perry.'

The doctor grimaced. He'd had to deal with the appalling mess outside his front door. He hadn't liked the bastard but he wouldn't have wished such an end on his worst enemy. He'd

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done a spell as a young intern in an accident unit and he'd never seen anything like that—not in a year of Saturday nights. The body had been pulped like a ripe tomato and the insides sucked out. It had been encased in slime like a glistening placenta. Death had failed to smooth the furrows of terror on the untouched face.

Getting Judy past it all had been the worst. He'd had to cover her face, but the smell had betrayed him. She was safe now in one of the wards. He wished he could have said the same for their child. He wondered if there would ever be another time.

Loring interrupted his thoughts. 'There's something else I'd like to attempt, with your sanction. If this thing came from out there, in space, I think we should try to put it back. In other words, put some of the cultures in the simulation chambers. We could see what happens to the cells in the Martian atmosphere, and also in a deep space situation. OK?'

It was a good idea and Nelson said so. Dick Loring was a boon. He was proving indefatigable, much more use than himself. He'd taken more than enough and simply had to have an hour's sleep. After the death of the General he'd had to take over co-ordinating the search until the OIC from Hale arrived. He blamed himself for losing Steve. He'd panicked when he'd heard Judy on the phone and dashed over to the house without alerting anyone else. They'd lost valuable minutes in rounding up the search party and again their quarry had disappeared into the night. Any more killings would be his responsibility alone.

He left Loring to prepare the culture dishes and put his head into the room where Judy was sleeping. She looked peaceful enough and the nurse at her bedside gave an encouraging nod. She still didn't know about her mother.

He turned and left. He was halfway down the corridor to his office when the thought struck him with a shudder. Why wasn't she protected? His blood ran cold at the thought of the stupid oversight. It was criminally neglectful after what had happened. He hadn't thought to spare a single soldier or policeman to guard the centre and Steve was probably somewhere in the complex. People must be protected. None of them was safe, himself included.

He was in touch with the OIC immediately. The man was

cast in the same bone-headed mould as the General. Sorry, they couldn't spare any men, but if Doctor Nelson was really worried he'd get in touch with the lieutenant of police to see if he could find someone.

Nelson put the phone down in a cold fury. It had not got through to the authorities what they were dealing with. The General's last phone call to Houston had been quite sanguine. Just a slight hitch, nothing to delay the countdown, he'd reported.

The doctor hadn't been able to believe his ears. Any chance of them succeeding in convincing the authorities of the magnitude of the crisis and getting them to call off the launch rested with what they could come up with in the lab in the next few hours. They were even treating Perry's death as a regrettable accident, unconnected with the programme. What sort of eloquence was required if the disembowelled remains of a two-star General couldn't persuade them?

He abandoned any notion of sleep and helped himself to a handful of stimulants. A couple of minutes later he was back in the lab with Loring.

Loring was on the last stage of developing some more film of the living cells. The doctor didn't have long to wait before he was again watching the astonishing voracity of the predatory cells.

One cell was distinctly larger than the others and Loring's camera had skilfully concentrated on tracing it. It hadn't been easy because of its rapid movement and they kept losing it from the field of vision. They'd lost it for a number of frames when it suddenly reappeared. It provoked a cry from the two scientists.

'Look!' shouted Loring. The cell had become stationary, drawing in its arms of questing cytoplasm until its shape was perfectly round. Then a dark line shot across the film. It continued on the next series of frames until it weakened and finally disappeared. The sequence ended with the cell collapsing in on itself, leaving only strands of shapeless protoplasm in the matrix.

'Run it back,' demanded Nelson.

They watched the dying seconds of the alien cell again. This time they stopped the film when the dark line appeared,

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'That's the emission of the radioactive particle,' explained Loring. 'Now watch.' He ran the film on a few frames. 'It's the signal for the cell to self-destruct.' They watched it implode again.

'I could have sworn it was about to divide,' cried Loring excitedly. 'Everything seemed ready until the emission. Then it collapsed.'

'As if it had got the signal to abort at the last minute,' said Nelson.

'As though things weren't right, the structure wrong for reproduction.'

They'd witnessed a combination of electrical and chemical energy that Ted Nelson would never have thought possible in a living thing. The mechanics of cellular change were obscurely enough understood, but this kind of sophistication was undreamt of. What on earth were they dealing with? To get some sort of insight, the success of the tissue cultures was imperative.

They began their work, preparing the ideal conditions for the cells to germinate. They had to let the thing live and grow before they could discover a way to kill it. The lives of three more astronauts depended on it. The fourth seemed already beyond redemption.

The last stroke of midnight fell heavily on the still air. Somewhere an owl shrieked. A farm dog barked nervously. Then the silence settled again like a fitful sleeper.

Above the church spire where the black cross was etched against the sky the clouds lightened. The thin moon was struggling to shake off the blanket of darkness. Slowly the shadows awakened in the churchyard. Headstones poked grimly out of the black earth: sombre crosses, an obelisk, an earth-bound angel with a broken wing. Between them a bat made his flitting circuit of inspection.

The moon had lost the battle with the clouds and disappeared.

Pained breathing broke the stillness and a drunken thing lurched into the graveyard. He saw the broken angel and stumbled towards it. He was breathing like a man who'd swallowed petrol.

He rested against the marble flank of the angel and stared up at the spire. The moon broke free and came out to watch him, watch one of the sky children.

The thing raised his cruel claw towards the black cross and shook it. He wept molten tears which glistened on his wrecked face in the pale moonlight.

It was a signal for the sky to clear. Beyond the cross the pagan constellations ranked and infinity came out to taunt his poor mortality.

His lipless mouth hung open and his sunken eyes grew round with wonderment. A deep longing stirred in his heart. The awful claw was again raised, but this time like a child he tried to pick the stars as if they were white flowers.

From his burning throat a word struggled to form. 'Mi—Mine.'

But he was only to be allowed a brief glimpse of his new inheritance. More clouds were spreading through the sky, blotting out the stars, his stars. A film of blood smeared his eyes and the red mist grew. Panic welled inside his breast and he answered it in the only way he could, in the way the clamouring cells had taught him. He lunged at the human figure beside him, gouging at the hard flesh till the blood ran warm, his own blood.

He struggled there with his agony in the churchyard until he fell exhausted to the ground, clutching the black marble head of the broken angel.

The dust storm seethed around him like a plague of locusts. The distant sun shrank to a red ball and was blotted out. The red desert collapsed around him, swallowing him into the dark depths of her dry throat.

He covered his head to still the crescendo of drumming as the thousands of tiny claws explored the strange form of the visitor to their planet. Locked in his suit he felt the mounting panic of claustrophobia. It was as if the fine dust had seeped into his life-support system and instead of breathing air he was breathing the burning sand of Mars.

He tried to pluck off his helmet, wrestling with the screws, and when they wouldn't move, tugging, like a

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man trying to pull off his own head. He was suffocating, and like a drowning swimmer he kicked and threshed. But the distant voice of his reason, of his training as an astronaut, called out to him to be still. Not to panic. And with a terrible effort of will he unlocked his cramped muscles, regulated his breathing. Slowly he fought back against the madness which had seized him, and he relaxed.

The storm was still, but when he tried to open his eyes he thought he'd been struck by blindness. A huge red blot obscured his vision.

Again he felt the tide of panic rising within him, and again he had to push it down. The sand had blocked the air supply and his brain had been starved of oxygen. He'd suffered a retinal haemorrhage. The possibilities flashed before his mind, and his reason rejected them all. He stared again straight before him. The blot was still there.

Then it dawned on him with cold horror. There was something stuck to his face mask, and it was looking in at him.

He tried to strike it off with his hand, brush it off. But he couldn't move his arm, it felt like lead. He steeled himself to look on it.

However hard he tried it was just out of focus, too close to the eye for his straining ciliary muscles to accommodate. But he could tell that it was moving, within itself, like the molecular movement of a liquid excites the tiniest particles suspended there. It was a jelly pulsing with life.

As he stared, straining to read some message in the random movements, vivid pictures began to flash before his mind.

He saw the mauve sky and the distant sun, a faint blue star with an attendant moon, the new configuration of the sky he'd so recently learnt to recognise.

Phobos hung there too, pale and haggard on the horizon.

But there were clouds moving steadily across the sky, and as the light began to grow they thickened, white and substantial like clouds on earth. And beneath them where the red desert had stood were green fields and woods full of rich trees. A silver river wound through the fields, its banks thick with flowers. Overhead the perfumed air was filled with birdsong.

Then, out of the woods came a huge beast. Its hard sleek flanks glinted like polished steel and its red eyes burned hungrily. It raised itself up on to its hind legs, threw back its massive head and sniffed the air. Wet black nostrils dilated and quivered. Then they stiffened. It had smelt warm flesh.

The jaws flashed open and a bellow of triumph burst from its glistening throat. In the field the grazing creatures heard it and stirred uneasily. Some tried to run but their short fat legs weren't made for rapid movement. The rest huddled together for protection, small hearts pulsing under the warm brown fur. They waited for death like priests.

The huge predator struck in a fury of aggression, slashing wildly with its murderous talons and scattering the warm brown things about the field. Killing for killing's sake in a festival of destruction. And when it had clawed the life out of everything that moved, leaving its print of slaver it sated itself on the warm flesh, unzipping the wet fur to lap the blood, its cruel red eyes rolling in ecstasy.

Time unfolded and the huge beast was there again, clawing the sky at the edge of the forest. This time men crept towards it through the grass, their bodies decked with skins, wicked javelins gleaming in their raised hands. They stalked the beast, fanning out to surround it as it towered above them in its vast stupidity.

Then the spears flew, piercing the armoured hide until the blood splashed in rivers down its massive hulk and it fell to its knees threshing the air wildly in its agony and howling in rage. One of the men ran for-

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ward and plunged his spear in its hot throat and stood as the blood gouted over him. And the others laughed with glee and followed suit, bathing in the hot red blood and rubbing it over their bodies.

Time passed again and the background constellations changed with the barely perceptible jerk of a faulty film. Now the green fields had given way to a sea of red mud. Men crawled about it like brown grubs, burrowing into the ground where spiked engines of war protruded menacingly. Suddenly the sky erupted with gunfire, shells whined and exploded in an upheaval of mud and men. Ranks of the scurrying termites closed in on one another and were engulfed in fire and black smoke. When the smoke cleared they were gone and the scene was still. The red mud had grown redder.

Again there was change. The mud had disappeared, so had the trees. A clean white apron of concrete stretched as far as the eye could see. Geometric shapes rested on it: tall rectangles with edges as sharp and straight as razor blades, huge spheres honeycombed with octagonal windows which shone with hard yellow light. A latticework of steel lines bore rapidly moving cylinders shuttling to and fro between the buildings. Overhead the glittering lights melted into an orange glow.

Into the orange glow sailed a silver ship moving swiftly and silently. For a moment it hovered high over the centre of the geometrical city. Then it released a shining metal object and disappeared at incredible speed towards the horizon.

The object seemed to hang in the sky, glinting in the sunlight. Then it dropped remorselessly towards the earth.

When it struck, the city dissolved in a searing molten ball. A huge plume rose into the sky drawing the melted fragments with it, sucking the blazing atmosphere upwards into space. The living envelope of the planet was pierced and the contaminated dust rushed

in to fill the vacuum. Life mushroomed skywards and was tossed to waste in the inhospitable corners of the solar system. Only the red cloud returned to pay its respects and scatter dust over the grave of the city.

Slowly his vision cleared, and the barren Martian landscape resumed its sharp focus. The sun was sinking towards the horizon, casting shadows along the boulder-strewn ground and into the jagged mouths of the craters. He could move his arm again and he drew his hand over his face-mask and inspected his gloves. Tiny red flecks of the brittle lichen-like material stuck to the silver coating.

He rose to his feet but stumbled as one leg refused to support him. It felt dead. He bent to inspect it and saw that a panel of his suit had been torn. Inside, the calf of his leg was numb with cold. He glanced nervously again at the declining sun. The temperature must be well below freezing already. If he didn't find the module soon he'd lose the leg with frostbite.

He rubbed the limb in a bid to restore the circulation. He must have torn the suit scrambling down the rocks. He'd have been dead now if it hadn't been for the separately insulated panels. He sighed with relief as he began to feel the life return to the limb. In a moment he was back on his feet and jogging in loping bounds across the desert.

The dust storm had disappeared without trace. He wondered for the first time whether it had caught the others. What would they make of his vision? Was it a vision or simply a nightmare generated by his own panic? Or was he suffering from space sickness and developing hallucinations?

His leg was feeling painful, as though it was in contact with freezing metal which was drawing the heat out of the rest of his body. He was becoming rapidly exhausted. He hadn't eaten all day and energy loss under reduced gravitation could be deceptively high when movement seemed so simple.

He was moving at walking speed now, not much

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faster than a quick stroll on Earth. His leg was burning. He thought of it blackening and cracking. It would have to be amputated aboard ship if it was frostbitten; they couldn't wait until they got back to Earth, it might develop gangrene.

He was morbidly wondering what tools they'd use when he caught a glimpse of the metal hull of the module glinting in the rays of the dying sun. It gave him new energy and he broke into a stumbling trot. The other two were standing outside looking for him and when they saw him they came running.

They helped him aboard and peeled off his suit in the airlock. Mike who acted as crew doctor examined the leg once they were back in the living quarters.

'You're still bleeding,' he announced.

Where the suit had been torn a patch of red was seeping down his calf.

Steve automatically touched it, then drew back his hand in sudden revulsion. It was sticky, quite unlike blood.

'Wipe it off!' he screamed. 'And throw it outside. It's growing on me!'

A choking whimper rose from the graveyard. In a spasm of rage the thing hurled the stone head it was holding towards the black cross on the high spire. There was an explosion of glass as it burst through the leaded window and shattered on the stone floor before the altar. Possessed by the blind fury that consumed him the melting man lunged away from the church.

The unquenchable thirst for flesh drove him towards a distant light which burned out across the fields. His sight was blurred and faltering but a new sense had come to his aid. Now he could smell food, the warm life-blood of humanity. Several times he stopped, raising drooping shoulders and sweeping the night air with his upturned face. The crumbling cavities of his nose trembled for a moment, then he was off again on the scent, shoulders hunched, his dripping body rolling in an awkward gait, the muddy and torn hospital robe flapping behind him.

He was learning stealth also, an animal cunning. He stopped

at the gate to listen. It was quiet. He began to pad softly up the drive towards the farmhouse. Long before he reached the window he was crouching on all fours, gasping heavily with the effort.

He raised himself to look in at the lighted window, pressing his face to the glass and leaving an imprint of slime. He saw nothing and edged towards the doors. He suddenly stiffened. The noise of voices came dimly to him.

He turned the handle and pushed open the door. Standing in the threshold, the hall light throwing his immense shadow out across the garden, he let out a bubbling cry and lunged inside the house. He burst through the door of the room where the voices were and stood for a moment groping for his prey with the distended arm. Then he let out a sharp cry of disappointment. The room was empty. Only a radio had been left on.

He flung the set aside and it burst like matchwood against the wall. He charged through into the kitchen. Again the room was empty. He scoured the house, mumbling and cursing to himself unintelligibly. In a rage of disappointment and hunger he stumbled downstairs. The house was empty.

He switched off the light and hid in the darkened room, waiting for the occupants to return.

EIGHT

‘NOTHING EVER happens in this Godforsaken place,’ grumbled Fred Zimwell. His right leg was going to sleep and he laboriously disentangled it from underneath the other on the desk top, dislodging a pile of old copy in the process. Scores of sheets of paper were scattered all over the office floor.

‘Damn and blast!’ he cursed, all his frustration coming to the boil. What had they got for tomorrow’s edition? The paper would be full of the usual syndicated crap, not a single local story of the slightest significance. How the hell could he be expected to make a name for himself in such a backwater? The *Trentham Globe*, he sneered cynically. Some globe! You could write down everything that ever happened here on the back of a golf ball.

In a last despairing effort to dig out something he could sell to a paper where he’d get some notice, he picked up the telephone. He’d try the duty calls again. Police HQ. Please God let there be some juicy smash up on the highway. An epidemic of rabies? Something.

The switchboard girl sounded harassed. When she realised who it was she became insulting. ‘Not you again?’ she sneered. ‘Why don’t you go home to bed?’

Fred applied the charm. ‘Now come on, Doris, honey. What’s gotten into my favourite telephone girl? No one told you how beautiful you are tonight?’

‘Look, stop bothering me,’ she replied waspishly. ‘We’re busy.’

Fred pounced eagerly. ‘Great! What’s going on? Murder? Gimme a lead.’

There was an anxious pause at the other end of the line. Doris lowered her voice to reply.

'There's been an accident on the Queenston road. An old couple. There are no more details.' She rang off.

Damn! he thought. That wasn't a lot to go on. Still, it was better than nothing. He'd try the fire department. If it was a bad smash they'd know and they were more help than the hospital.

But as far as the fire people were concerned it was a quiet night. And in Trentham, quiet meant quiet.

He'd made up his mind to take a trip out to find out what was going on when the office door crashed open. The night editor burst in, shouting for him.

Christ! thought Fred. Something must have happened to tear him away from his boozing cronies.

'Zimwell,' cried the editor. 'Get up off your backside. I want you to do a job.'

The young man shot to his feet and dislodged another pile of papers from his desk. The editor stoically ignored his antics.

'I've just had a tip-off that the military have been called into the research centre,' he said. 'And there's top brass about, some General or other from Houston. It could give us a local slant on tomorrow's launch. I want you to go down there and talk to the director—Doctor Nelson, I think he's called. He probably won't talk. But snoop about a bit and try and find out what's going on.'

The reporter was at the door when the editor called him back.

'And take care, Zimwell,' he warned. 'There's talk of some nut on the loose. Attacking people. So watch out!'

As he drove to the centre, for the first time in memory during his stay on the *Globe* Zimwell felt the adrenalin coursing through his system. A maniac on the loose and the army called out to hunt him. Probably armed with some highly sophisticated modern weapon. His imagination ran wild. He was working on the headline with a by-line big enough for the whole nation to notice his name when he arrived at the gates of the centre. His disappointment was profound when he found the place deserted and for the most part in darkness. Only one wing of the complex was lit.

He was in for an even greater disappointment when he got

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out of his car and wandered over to the gatehouse. If he was a member of the press, said the security officer, there was just no way he would be let in. Those were his orders and Goodnight.

By dint of massive perseverance Zimwell managed to persuade the officer to ring through to the director to see if he could be admitted. The response was a very curt negative.

He drove slowly round the perimeter road which skirted the centre's security fence. The army must be somewhere and there was bound to be a soldier with a liquor problem bigger than his pay cheque where a few dollar bills wouldn't go amiss.

He'd circled the centre and was almost back on the main highway without getting a single glimpse of any army personnel. They must be searching the forest south of the highway, that could be the only explanation.

He glanced up at the church clock as he passed. Twelve fifteen. A damn silly hour to be combing the countryside on his own with a madman about. He suddenly braked. Beyond the church there was a light still burning in a farmhouse set amongst the fields. His first sight of any sign of civilisation. If anyone knew what was going on, they should. The army had probably trampled all over their fields.

He turned the car round and set off up the lane that ran past the church and up to the farm. The moon was hidden and his headlights jabbed a yellow path through the blackness. Behind him the night slid back noiselessly.

He pulled up at the gate and switched off his lights. He got out of the car and looked about him.

It was a pretty lonely place if there was a madman on the rampage. The police had probably warned them not to let anyone in and he wouldn't stand a cat in hell's chance of being answered. Yet they'd left the light on without drawing the curtains and that wasn't the action of nervous folks. He put his hand on the gate and pushed it open. It felt sticky. Damn, he thought. Probably just been painted. He rooted for his handkerchief and wiped his fingers. He began to feel nervous.

He walked up the garden path, whistling low, half under his breath, to keep his spirits up. He'd got halfway up the path when the light went out.

He cursed again and felt his heart start to pound. He stopped and wavered. They were probably going to bed. Perhaps he ought to leave it and go away.

He renewed his determination. No, he mustn't give them a chance to get upstairs otherwise they'd never answer. He quickened his step and knocked on the front door.

There was silence. He became aware of the darkness of the surrounding fields, crouching menacingly, watchful of his every move. He knocked again more heavily.

Again the silence. He was a fool. Of course they wouldn't answer. They'd have been warned if a nut was about.

He called out.

'Hello there! I wonder if you can help me? I'm from the *Globe*.'

The darkness swallowed his words.

He began to feel self-conscious and silly. The *Globe* indeed! These hillbillies had probably never heard of the *Globe*. Odds on they were illiterate. In any case, even if they had heard of it they probably didn't care. It was a second-rate rag. The vision of his by-line in a really important newspaper returned and stiffened his resolve. He tried the door handle. My God! They'd painted that as well!

But it was open. He pushed his head into the hallway and shouted again. There was no answer. He listened carefully. A faint panting sound was coming from one of the rooms off the central hallway. It sounded like a dog.

He hesitated again. Better not go beyond the door. He could always shut it in the animal's face if it came for him. He didn't want tearing apart in the course of duty.

He tried calling to it in a friendly whisper, making reassuring noises. They were just as afraid as you were. That's what made them so savage.

'Come on, boy,' he called. 'It's only me. Come on, lets have a look at you.'

The panting increased.

He sensed there was something wrong. It hadn't barked. In any case, it wasn't hot enough for a dog to be panting. It was quite cold.

It must be a person! He'd scared them. They'd heard the car

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coming and put the light out because they were afraid. He went through the *Globe* rigmarole again.

'It's OK,' he added lamely when it was again met with silence. 'You can see my press card if you like.'

A strange whimper came from the room, like nothing he'd ever heard before.

There was someone *in extremis* in there. Probably an old fella that he'd frightened out of his wits and who was having a stroke.

He stepped into the hall and tip-toed towards the door. It was slightly ajar. He paused outside and listened.

The noise had risen to a grotesque rasping, like a mad beast choking on its own slaver. It totally unnerved the reporter and he turned quickly and ran out of the house, slamming the door behind him. He sprinted down the path to the gate and didn't stop until he was safely inside the car.

No wonder they didn't bother to lock the door, he thought as he sat trying to get his breath back. It sounded as if they'd got a wolf chained up inside there, not a dog. He didn't like dogs at the best of times and he shuddered at his own rashness at going in. It was bone-headed. He didn't want the story so badly.

He was still perspiring violently as he drove back down the lane, and when he tried to mop his brow with the back of his hand his fingers stuck to the steering wheel.

As he turned back onto the road by the church he was only a few hundred yards from the main highway. Through the trees he caught a glimpse of a flashing warning light coming towards him from the direction of the town. As he stopped at the junction to let it pass he saw that it was a breakdown truck. It must be on its way to remove the wreckage from the pile-up. He decided to follow it. The truck was going his way and if he drew a blank on the army story he wouldn't have to go back to the office empty-handed. He could always get some details about the accident. In Trentham you couldn't choose your stories, you had to grab them while they were there.

As he was about to pull out and follow the truck he caught the glow of headlights in his rear mirror. Someone was coming up behind. It was all activity at last. He wondered if he'd finally caught up with the army and he hung on to get a good look at

the vehicle. But just before the church it turned off the road and disappeared in the direction of the farmhouse.

The hillbillies returning to feed their pet ghoul, he thought sardonically, and set off after the breakdown truck.

He hadn't far to go. The truck had stopped further down the road and was manoeuvring into position next to an old Buick in the ditch. He was flagged down by a policeman. Other figures he couldn't properly make out were standing round the car.

'What's going on, officer?' he asked brightly as the policeman came up to the car. It was a face he recognised from the local force.

'Hm. It's the *Globe*, is it?' grunted the officer suspiciously. 'You lot don't miss much.'

'There's not a lot to miss round here,' rejoined Zimwell wily.

'Maybe not,' conceded the officer. 'But we could do without this sort of thing.'

The reporter glanced at the Buick. There didn't appear to be any damage to it.

'What *has* happened, officer?' he asked.

'I'm afraid it's top security.' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the figures round the car. Zimwell could see now that he'd caught up with some of the elusive soldiers.

'Can't you give us a clue?' he wheedled.

The officer leant closer. 'Look, Zimwell,' he whispered. 'Keep this under your hat, but there's been a pretty nasty murder. The military are after him now. That's all I can tell you.'

'And where's that going?' Zimwell asked, pointing towards the Buick.

The officer looked anxiously over his shoulder before he answered.

'They're taking it down to the research centre. Some special forensic examination. That's all I know.'

He straightened up. 'Now if you'll move on, we can clear the road.'

Zimwell drove slowly past, craning to get a good look at the Buick. No, it certainly didn't look damaged. But what was that stuff on the windows? They seemed to be daubed with something. He must find out what had happened.

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He drove several hundred yards down the road until he was out of sight round the corner. Then he drew on to the grass verge and switched off his engine and lights. He'd wait for the breakdown truck and follow it to the centre. He'd got to see this Doctor Nelson and get some answers.

A bold idea suddenly occurred to him. He wouldn't wait for the truck. He'd go on ahead, park his car somewhere out of sight near the gate to the centre, and when the truck arrived, with a bit of luck he'd sneak in on the back while the driver was getting clearance from the security man.

It was a hell of a risky thing, but he was on to the story of a lifetime. His nose told him.

'Funny,' said Matt as he stopped the pickup outside the farm gate. 'I thought I left the light on.'

'You did,' said Nell. 'But then you went back inside to see what time the movie started. You probably switched it off again.'

Matt looked unconvinced, but his young wife drew her soft hand over his furrowed brow. Cupping his cheeks in her palms she drew down his head and kissed the wrinkles away.

'You're getting absent-minded in your old age, you know,' she said laughingly.

'Life begins at thirty,' he protested. 'And I'm determined to start to really enjoy it. Now that we're married and have got a place of our own.'

He slipped his arm round her waist and she let her head rest on his shoulder while they both looked out at their new home.

The clouds had cleared and soft moonlight shone down on the roof. The clematis that hung round the door in profusion climbed to meet it, pale flowers unfolding like hands raised in gentle supplication to the stars.

'Doesn't it look peaceful,' sighed Nell. 'So friendly and welcoming.'

Matt disengaged his arm and kissed her. 'I think I know a more comfortable place for this sort of thing. Don't you?'

Nell laughed, protesting modestly that she didn't know what he was talking about. They both climbed out of the truck and made their way hand in hand up the garden path.

He reached for the doorknob and suddenly drew back his hand.

'What the devil—?' he cried, bringing the hand close to his face to inspect what had stuck to it.

'Ugh!' he cried in revulsion as the slime stretched between his fingers before falling with its own weight in a long string to the ground.

'What's the matter, darling?' called Nell in alarm. 'What is it?'

'I don't know,' replied Matt, brushing the rest off on the stonework of the house. He bent down and peered closely at the doorknob.

'It's covered in the stuff,' he complained. He plucked a couple of clematis leaves off the plant and pressed them round the doorknob so that he could open it without touching any more of the slime. With the other hand he fished for his key. He turned it in the lock but nothing happened. The door began to open as he tried the handle. He quickly pulled it back and closed it again.

'It's not locked,' he whispered in concern.

'You must have forgotten to lock it,' came his wife's voice from the darkness nervously. 'Why don't you go in?'

Matt paused, distractedly wiping his hand against the leg of his trousers.

'I don't like it,' he said. 'There's something odd going on. You wait here while I check.'

He slowly turned the handle and pushed open the door. He stood poised on the threshold listening keenly. Nell watched him as he crept noiselessly inside. Halfway down the hallway he stopped and she saw his head turn on one side as if he'd caught a sound but wasn't sure what it was. Then, his mind made up, he stepped into the darkness of one of the rooms. In the same moment there was a loud thud that shook the passage wall and the door of the room slammed shut.

Nell's heart lurched sickeningly.

'Matt!' she screamed. 'Matt!'

She was answered by a silence that spread round the house like a shroud. Then, slowly, out of the closed room came the sound of lapping, like a giant cat drinking.

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Appalled at her own temerity, Nell edged towards the room. Only an overwhelming dread for the safety of her husband drove her trembling limbs. As she wavered in the doorway, from within a dry rasping sound began to punctuate the lapping noises. Her shaking hand clasped the handle and she gradually pressed open the door.

A pale band of moonlight slipped past her into the darkness. It traced a dim path of light through a trail of broken furniture and came to rest on a grey shape crouched over something in the corner.

The lapping stopped and it turned slowly to look at her.

She'd interrupted its meal. Blood dribbled down its chin and daubed the riven edges of its rotting mouth. From its fist hung warm entrails, smoking faintly in the cool air of the room. It shuffled awkwardly, trying to shield what it was doing from her horrified gaze, shame burning in the hunted eyes.

But she had seen the human saucer into which it dipped its dripping mouth: the sprawled form of her Matt with his bowels torn out. She let out a howl of anguish.

The red rage leapt back into its eyes and it stumbled to its feet. Nell's paralysis dissolved in a panic of flight. She sprang across the hallway into the kitchen, slamming the door behind her. The door had no lock and she cast about despairingly for something to wedge against it as the dreadful rasping noise followed her into the corridor. With it came the moist furtive pad of damp footsteps. They stopped outside the kitchen door.

With a superhuman effort she dragged the dresser in front of the door. As she wedged it into place the handle began to turn. She felt the pressure grow as the thing became frustrated. She had to use all her strength to hold the dresser in place, but still it began to move. Her grip was being lost on the polished tiles of the kitchen floor and her feet began to slide.

Then suddenly the pressure stopped and the door slammed shut. The thing had given up and she heard the broken breathing retreat. It was going away. Her heart pounded a tattoo of relief.

She grabbed the phone from its wall hook and urgently dialled the operator. It rang interminably. Her eyes never left the door, her body coiled like a spring waiting for *it* to return and

renew its efforts. After an age the cheerful voice of the operator replied.

'Get help to the farm,' she cried hysterically. 'Matt's been murdered!'

There was a long pause before the operator replied. 'Who is this?' she asked suspiciously.

'It's Nell Winters at the farm. We're being attacked. Help!'

She could stand it no longer. Her ears were deafened by the drumming of blood, and the image of her mutilated husband burst over her mind in a spasm of delayed shock. She flung down the phone and pulled open a drawer, arming herself with a meat cleaver. It was wickedly sharp, and she'd never before been able to bring herself to touch it. Matt used it when they killed stock. Matt.

She was blinded by the hot tears. Panic and despair fused to throw out burning sparks of hatred. Five minutes had robbed her of a lifetime's love and happiness. Five minutes and some crazy perverted psychopath had torn out her life as well as Matt's and the lives of their unborn children.

She raised the cleaver menacingly, emitting a sob of fury. She must be revenged.

She heaved at the dresser, trying to pull it away from the door. But her strength had ebbed. She spent some of her fury in vain struggling to move it, tears of frustration running down her face. Then she slumped back into a chair by the window, the cleaver hanging loosely from her limp hand. Her mind went numb.

There was an explosion of glass and she was showered with splinters. Something wet whipped round her neck like a slimy rope and dragged her up against the sink. A blast of hot and foetid breath burst on her. She squirmed round and found herself staring into the decaying pits of the thing's eyes. Black and swollen pupils swam restlessly in a sea of red jelly and dripping remnants of flesh hung to the exposed bone of its forehead like pallid fungus. It bent towards her and she watched the frayed edges of the mouth pucker around the blood-stained teeth. The burning stench of its breath kissed her lips as a gurgle of pleasure bubbled up from its hot throat.

She shrank with revulsion, sliding loose on the wet arm. Her

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fingers tightened round the shaft of the cleaver and she swung it in the air bringing it down hard on the glistening arm. It sliced through the limb like cheese and the arm fell at her feet, the fingers twitching and clawing at the floor in a paroxysm of death. She watched in horrid fascination as the stump ran blood which suddenly set like sealing wax.

The thing let out a bellow of pain and shrank back from the window. Whimpering and gasping it disappeared into the shadows of the garden.

She struggled with the slime that covered her neck but it clung to her like melting plastic. It was in her hair, a thick web of mucus, reeking with the unmistakable stink of putrescent flesh. She clawed madly at her hair like an ensnared creature before slumping to the floor in impotent exhaustion.

Only her eyes showed signs of life as she stared at the dismembered limb in abject terror.

NINE

THEY WERE having difficulty trying to get the cells to grow. They were voracious but vulnerable. Without plentiful supplies of living tissue they rapidly encysted, clustering together in colonies which took on a reddish hue. But living tissue of the right kind was something they didn't have much of, not to spare.

At first Loring had suggested using some of the laboratory rats. They'd injected the blood stream with the cells and waited for it to have some effect. But the animals remained disconcertingly robust. When they eventually killed one and opened it up, they found groups of the cells engulfed by leucocytes. They hadn't troubled the rats.

'It's only interested in human cells, I'm afraid,' announced Loring after he'd examined the rat. 'It's sensitive enough to tell the difference and unless it gets what it wants it curls up and won't play.'

Not for the first time Ted Nelson cringed at his colleague's choice of words. What was happening to Steve didn't seem to affect him. He was absorbed in the hunt for a new species. His objectivity distressed the doctor because he still kept alive an insane hope of saving his friend.

'We'll use Perry.'

Loring's words cut deep into the doctor's thoughts.

'What's that?' he demanded sharply.

'Use Perry,' repeated Loring. 'There'll still be enough living tissue about him. Why not grow the cells on Perry?'

Nelson felt sick. He stared bleakly at his assistant.

'Are you suggesting that we start cutting up one of the most important men in the Pentagon before the public knows he's dead?' he said with slow incredulity.

'We won't have to cut him up,' said Loring blandly. 'Given the state he's in, it's only a question of rearranging a few things. No one need know there's anything missing.'

It was macabre enough to be funny on any other occasion, but the events of the past eighteen hours had done nothing for Ted Nelson's sense of humour.

'Do medical ethics count for nothing with you, Loring?' he demanded angrily.

But Loring countered with equal vigour.

'No, sir,' he replied. 'But they do seem to be a trifle superfluous with Steve out there on the rampage carrying God knows what around inside him, and three more men poised to end up in the same way if we don't come up with something in the next six hours.'

Nelson apologised. Once more he counted his good fortune at having Loring around at a time like this.

He rested a friendly hand on the assistant's shoulder.

'Come on, Doctor Frankenstein,' he joked grimly. 'Let's go and see what we can rescue from Perry.'

He led the way to the morgue.

At the moment they removed the bloodstained sheet from the body of the General, only a quarter of a mile away Fred Zimwell of the *Trentham Globe* was on the threshold of the most unforgettable journey of his short career.

The breakdown truck had pulled up at the gatehouse and the driver was leaning out of his cab window having his papers checked by the security officer. From out of the shadows at the roadside a hunched figure crept towards the opposite side of the truck. He hesitated when he realised that the lifting gear filled the rear of the truck and there was no room for him to hide. In the same moment, having obtained clearance, the driver pushed the truck into gear and revved the engine. Fred Zimwell had no choice but to scramble into the back of the Buick as its rear wheels began to roll forward into the centre.

It took all his self-control to avoid crying out and betraying himself. Everywhere he touched was coated with slime. As he drew back his hands from one patch, they slid into another. He couldn't see a thing, and when he tried to steady himself on the

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tilting slippery floor, the vehicle lurched and pitched him headfirst into the back seat. He hadn't time to protect his face and as it slid across the upholstery it collected a layer of the stuff. He tasted it on his lips, rank and salty, and it blinded and stung his eyes. As he tried to brush it from his mouth he transferred more of it from his hands. He felt like an insect on fly-paper. His lungs burst with the effort of keeping out the nauseating stench: it was like being holed up with a rotting corpse.

By the time the journey was over he lay under the seat, face down in a pool of his own vomit.

The driver left his cab and it gave the reporter a chance to slither out and stagger into the shadow of the building. Another spasm of retching seized his stomach and nearly gave him away again. He could only crouch miserably in a corner swallowing it down. Release came with the noise of the truck manoeuvring the car into position and drowning the sounds of his distress.

He had to wait until the truck had gone. By then the impulse to abandon the whole ill-conceived venture had lessened. He felt slightly better and had already made plans to break into the first toilet he could find in order to clean himself up. His physical discomfiture worked one way in his favour: it made him forget the risk he was running snooping about a top security establishment and it spurred him on to get inside the building.

He moved swiftly towards a row of lighted windows. His attention had been caught by two white-coated figures bending over something that was heaped on to a long table. From a distance it looked like an untidy assortment of coloured rags, grey and red. Only when he'd taken several steps nearer did he realise what it was that was spilling over the edge of the table. It was a human arm, limp and lifeless.

He crept up to the window and peered over the sill. His well-practised stomach turned again. One of the men was probing about inside the most gruesomely mangled corpse he'd ever seen. A leg was torn off and from the stump blood still dripped through the tangle of shattered bone and twisted cartilage. The torso was unrecognisable. But the face. He easily recognised that. It was General James Perry, Head of Space Probe Operations, Houston.

What the hell had he unearthed?

Many of the deeper layers of tissue were unscathed and Loring's scalpel worked deftly. He rapidly transferred the neat strips of tissue to the waiting saline solution, and they bore what they could decently remove from General Perry back to the lab.

Loring introduced smears of the alien cells to the new medium. He was working under sterile conditions on most of the dishes. It was crucial that they find optimum conditions for multiplication as quickly as possible. The remaining cultures went into the simulators on the off-chance that it would reveal the source of the parent cells.

When they'd finished, both men could do nothing but wait for the voracious cells to do their work. Geiger counters installed alongside each culture would measure their success. They switched out the lights and left the lab.

Loring went for a bite to eat while the doctor returned to his office to get the latest on the search for Steve. The young, smooth-faced officer who'd replaced the General was looking very pleased with himself when he arrived. He'd just replaced the telephone receiver.

'You've found him?' demanded Nelson eagerly when he saw the expression.

Captain Gerald Sharpe shook his head, adjusting the self-satisfied smirk fractionally in deference to the doctor's worried frown.

'No, but we're closing in on him,' the Captain drawled. 'We'll soon have him. Don't you worry.'

Nelson could have floored him. He'd taken an instant dislike to the man when he'd heard his voice over the phone. The calm tone had belittled his own grave concern, and it seemed to epitomise the problem he was having in getting the authorities to listen to him.

In his own estimation Captain Sharpe had good reason to feel pleased with himself. He'd just replaced one of the most senior ranking officials in the US Army, literally taken over his command, as he saw it. It was an undreamed-of honour that augured very well for his future. Promotion could only follow. Of

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course he was ignoring the fact that he happened to be the only senior officer on duty when the emergency broke out—the rest of the base at Hale was out on an operation. And he also ignored the fact that it wasn't really a military operation, just a man-hunt for a nutty killer. None the less, he felt extremely pleased with the way things had turned out. And he'd particularly enjoyed putting that officious sheriff down just now on the phone. Ordering him, a trained soldier, where to deploy his men, indeed! *He* gave the orders and he wasn't having his troops following up routine police enquiries involving hysterical farmer's wives. He needed all his available manpower for the sweep. The net was tightening and he knew that the enemy was inside it. It was only a question of time.

'No reports of him striking again?' asked Nelson apprehensively.

The Captain stepped briskly to his feet and strode over to the map that was hanging on the wall. Waving a makeshift baton he proceeded to give Nelson a lecture in military strategy. It was the classical pincer movement, he expounded meticulously, adjusting a pin which was in danger of coming unstuck and removing a crucially important party of his men from the scene of battle.

The doctor ignored the lecture. 'Have you heard from the police?' he asked. 'Have they had any reports?' He knew Steve would strike again soon, a pattern was emerging. The cells craved nourishment.

The Captain looked offended at the interruption. 'I've just had a call from the sheriff,' he replied brusquely. 'Nothing important. Something about a farm. But he can't be over there. My men—' He was returning to his map when the doctor grabbed his arm.

'What farm?' he demanded.

The Captain grudgingly repeated the sheriff's story about a telephone call. Judy's call of only a few hours earlier was still fresh in Nelson's mind in all its horror.

'Get back on to him,' Nelson ordered. 'We're going there. It's time you saw what we're up against, instead of messing about playing at soldiers.'

Nelson's worst fears were confirmed when they arrived at the Winters' farm. At the gate the Geiger counter was picking up a moderate reading but as they approached the door it intensified. He ordered the party to stop.

'It looks as though he could still be here,' he said, lowering his voice to a whisper. He turned to the Captain, 'Order reinforcements. We want the place surrounded.'

The Captain hesitated but Nelson swung round on him in the dark. 'More men, Captain,' he hissed, 'Now. We mustn't let him go this time.'

Nelson ordered them back beyond the gate. While the Captain contacted his men on the short-wave radio, Nelson instructed two of the soldiers to mount their searchlights on the wall and sweep the garden for any signs of life. When they failed to locate anything he ordered them to train the light on the door.

'I'm going to go in there to see if he's inside,' he announced.

'I can't allow you to do that, Doctor,' said Captain Sharpe, 'It's too risky. I'll come with you.'

He turned to his men. 'I want you to cover us with your rifles. When I give the order, fire. Right?'

The doctor grimaced in the darkness. 'I don't think that will be necessary, yet, Captain,' he said, controlling his exasperation with difficulty. 'As far as we know he's still a human being. A very sick human being.'

Without replying the Captain clicked his heels and held open the gate. He had his hand on his gun as they followed the yellow track of light thrown by the searchlight. It picked out a glistening trail of mucus at their feet.

'What's that stuff?' asked the Captain with distaste.

His manner made Nelson callous. 'Part of the man we're looking for,' he said bluntly.

The Captain stopped. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Part of Steve West's epidermal tissues,' replied the doctor coldly. 'They've melted into a unicellular jelly. Amongst other things,' he added darkly.

'But how on earth—?' stammered the Captain. 'I'd no idea—!'

'There are a lot of things you don't know about this matter, Captain,' interrupted Nelson. 'So if you could stop treating it

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like a West Point exercise and remember that lives are at risk, maybe many more than we can imagine—' He left the sentence unfinished, afraid to voice his growing fears.

The farmhouse door was half open and he gently pushed it further until the searchlight spilt inside and illuminated the whole corridor. His heart sank when he saw the film of mucus shining amongst the wreckage.

'Steve?' he called quietly. 'Are you there?'

His words echoed down the corridor before being swallowed by the silence.

He stepped over the threshold and a huge shadow stretched down the corridor before him. A faint whimper arose from a room near the end.

Nelson sprang forward, driving his shadow into the far wall. He pushed on the door but it wouldn't open. The woodwork was smothered in slime.

'Quick,' he called to the Captain. 'Give me a hand with this door.'

As they pushed, the whimpering grew into a crescendo of terror.

'He's in there,' gasped Nelson. 'Push harder, man! We must save her!'

The door suddenly began to move and edge open with the scrape of heavy furniture. Nelson slid through the gap and jabbed on his torch.

'Don't, Steve,' he yelled. But the room was empty apart from the huddled screaming creature in the corner.

Nell Winters, her hands clasped tightly over her eyes, was beyond his reach in her private hell.

Nelson was doing his best to quieten her when there was a cry from behind him.

'Come and look at this!' called the shocked voice of the Captain.

The remains of Steve's dismembered arm lay on the floor. The flesh was melting and the fingerbones protruded like talons. In the shadow of the unlit kitchen, the dissolving flesh glinted with a faint red phosphorescence.

'Don't touch it!' cried Nelson. The Captain shrank back.

'Why? What is it?'

'It's his arm,' replied Nelson grimly. 'And it could be dangerously radioactive by now. Come on, help me to get her out.'

They supported the farmer's wife out of the house where two policemen took her to a waiting car. Nelson returned with a Geiger counter. It confirmed his suspicion that the release of radiation was on the increase and that the alien cells were maturing faster. Steve was becoming lethal in more ways than one.

The Captain found Matt Winters's remains and it matured him. The farmer's insides had been scooped out and plastered all over the corner of the room. He'd died from a single blow that had torn off the top of his skull like an extrovert peels an egg. His face still bore the mixed expression of horror and surprise that death could come so quickly. The egregious slime draped the body, almost tenderly, like a silk moth swathes her eggs.

Captain Sharpe fought back the nausea and went outside to organise his men. This time he led the search party himself. He'd stopped playing soldiers.

Fred Zimwell stared aghast at the face which met him in the mirror. It was caked with dry blood and puckered where the slime had dried and pulled the skin. He looked like the victim of an amateur plastic surgeon. The revolting smell still hung about him.

He'd been lucky to find an empty washroom and he plunged his hands into the warm water and worked up a good lather before smothering his face with the fresh-smelling soap. He felt like someone who'd been rescued from a plague pit.

When he'd sponged down his clothes and combed his hair, he felt a sudden resurgence of the journalistic adrenalin. He was on to the biggest story of his life and it was worth the discomfort and risk. He pushed his head out of the washroom door and surveyed the corridor. First he must find the room with the corpse and make absolutely sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. He'd seen the General before when he was first put in charge of operations at Houston last year. He'd paid a brief visit to the centre then and he'd been sent to get an interview. He'd got within two aides of the great man before being turned away. Still, it was a face he'd seen in the papers and he was ninety-nine per cent sure he wasn't wrong. But he wanted to be

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a hundred per cent. God! If only he'd brought the camera!

He slipped out into the corridor and made his way stealthily towards the morgue. It was the middle room of the wing and he had no difficulty in finding it. A spasm of nervous excitement shook him as he pushed open the door and stood in the darkness. He'd have to switch on the lights. As he did so he had a sudden idea. There were a number of lab coats hung up over by the wall. He'd look a lot less conspicuous to anyone outside if he slipped one on.

In his white coat he stood over the corpse and removed the cover. It was the General all right, they'd even put a name tag on his toe. But what a mess! He considered himself fairly unsqueamish when it came to corpses. He'd been first on the scene at plenty of automobile pile-ups, and he'd watched the ambulancemen scrape up some pretty dire sights from the highway. But impact crushed and pulped things. This guy had been eaten: there were teeth marks everywhere and long scratches like claw marks. Some effort had been made to clean him up, but where the wounds were deep there were pools of transparent fluid. He tentatively touched the stuff with a finger and watched with disgust as it stuck to him and stretched like wet glue. So that's why they'd wanted the car. The same thing that had been chewing lumps out of the General had been inside the back of the Buick with the old couple.

Was it a bear? But since when did bears hitch rides in Buicks? And it didn't explain what he'd seen half an hour earlier through the morgue windows. What had they been doing performing an autopsy on a man who'd died in such a manifestly obvious way? That was the next thing he must find out: what the two scientists had done with the bits of General Perry they'd removed.

He carefully replaced the sheet over the remains of the General and retreated from the morgue. The room next door was locked, and so was the one at the other side. The third door he tried was marked Pathology and it was open.

He'd got halfway inside when the sound of footsteps rang out in the corridor. Someone had left one of the rooms on the other side and was coming in his direction. He quickly closed the door and stood behind it listening. The footsteps arrived outside and

stopped. There was a moment's hesitation as they began to retreat.

He breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Whoever it was had obviously seen there was no light above the door and thought better of the visit. It meant that this time he daren't take the risk of switching on the light. He'd just have to wait and give his eyes time to grow accustomed to the gloom.

To judge from the hum of electric power that arose out of the shadows, the room was full of equipment. As he listened to the murmur he became conscious of an urgent clicking sound. It was coming from a bench in the centre of the room where he could discern some sort of faint light burning. As his eyes became more receptive he made his way towards it. Under a glass cover something was glowing with an eerie red phosphorescence. The rapid clicking was being emitted by a meter nearby.

The contents were a seething mass of activity: a red jelly that boiled and swirled with animation. There could be no question that it was not alive; nothing was there to excite it, no heat or instruments, just the pulsating jelly on top of some thin strips of red meat. Around the edges of the meat was a secretion of the transparent fluid he'd just seen on the corpse of the General. The thought struck him with a macabre revulsion. It was the General! They were feeding bits of the General to some super-active bacteria. They were growing things on him! What a story!

The meter continued to rattle out its message. It was obviously some sort of warning device judging from the way the needle kept lurching into the red. But there was something repulsively fascinating about the contents of the dish that held him there. He could swear it was growing, like an angry swelling. Yes, it was angry and inflamed like an infected wound, gathering like a boil. Only you could see the elements that made up the fulminating jelly: tiny red blurred eyes, seeking, questioning. He felt sure they were conscious of him, sure they were stirring in a delirious expectation. Hungrily.

He bent closer to get a better look at the squirming grains, the eyes of the jelly, and they suddenly grew still, for a split second they poised and focused. Then they leapt out at him.

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He recoiled. The red jelly hit the glass cover of the dish and hung there trembling. Then, slowly its own weight dislodged it and it fell back heavily like treacle into the bottom of the dish. It immediately resumed its urgent activity, hungrily probing the surface of the red meat.

The needle on the meter danced in wild applause.

Footsteps outside the door disturbed him and he looked round in panic for a place to hide. As the light from the corridor spread into the room he ducked under a bench by the wall and held his breath.

The strip lighting flickered and the lab was flooded in a blaze of white light. Loring appeared in the door and stood listening.

'Good God!' he cried. 'What's going on?'

Zimwell's heart froze. They'd found him.

But the footsteps moved hastily towards the centre bench. They were followed by others.

'My God! Look at that meter!' cried Loring. 'It's reaching a dangerous level.'

'I thought as much,' said Doctor Nelson. 'I told you about the arm.' There was a pause as he studied the contents of the dish. 'And there's the same phosphorescence. He can't last much longer.'

'Surely Steve couldn't have reached such a level of radiation?' said Loring.

'No, but it's only a question of time,' replied the doctor gravely. 'There'll be some natural resistance to the invasion from his body, and that's what's slowing the process up.' He pointed at the seething dish. 'But where there's no natural resistance, you can begin to see how rapidly it takes over.'

'What are you going to do with it?' asked Loring.

'Put it in the radiation chamber where it can't do any harm,' said the doctor, reaching for the dish. As his hand settled round the cover, the jelly spat up at him.

'Did you see that?' he cried, withdrawing his hand in alarm.

'Try it again,' urged Loring.

The doctor gradually brought his hand nearer the dish. As his fingers settled on it the jelly stiffened like an alerted spider, then struck savagely at the glass. He could feel the impact lift the lid.

'It can see you,' exclaimed Loring. 'How else does it do it?'

Nelson was baffled. 'Unless it's something to do with the radiation. Just as a bat will emit high frequency sound waves to sense objects, maybe this is using a similar method, using even shorter wavelengths.'

He didn't commit himself any further but watched Loring. He'd anticipated his reasoning and picked up a long glass rod. He drew the end over the glass a number of times but the jelly took no notice.

'Some signal,' said Loring. 'Subtle enough to distinguish between food and non-food.'

He had a sudden idea. 'Shall we try a rat?'

He was back in a moment with a laboratory rat which he deftly dropped on top of the dish. It sat there exploring the air with twitching snout. Once more the jelly ignored the bait. Only when he went to pick up the rat did it react. Again the lid jumped with the impact, this time more forcibly. It was getting hungrier. The red meat had disappeared to transparent jelly.

'It can tell when the food's suitable, when it's human tissue that's alive,' concluded Loring.

Nelson fell into a thoughtful silence. 'How much longer will we have to wait for the results of the plates from the HEP lab at Overton?' he demanded. 'We need to know more about this radiation. I've a feeling it's going to be crucial to our understanding of the cell's real nature.'

Loring said he was expecting to hear from them at any time. 'Meanwhile,' he asked, 'don't you think it's time we put this somewhere safe?'

The increased chatter of the Geiger counter seemed to confirm his suggestion. Nelson pressed the flat of his hand firmly on the lid and picked up the dish. The jelly went wild, transforming the glass to a child's paper weight where the snow-storm was of blood.

'Better feed it before you put it away,' said Loring with an effort at humour. 'Don't want it getting hungry and coming looking for one of us.'

'Yes,' agreed Nelson reluctantly. 'I suppose so. Only I wish it would hurry up and take on some composite structure. We still don't know what we're up against.'

'Except something bloody hungry,' said Loring rapidly pull-

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ing his fingers out of the way as a tendril of jelly shot out to greet the gobbet of human meat that he dropped into the dish.

'Down, Fido!' he jested nervously, swiftly replacing the lid.

They watched as the jelly began to ingest the flesh, drawing its glutinous body possessively over the food like a predator licking the still warm carcass of its prey, kissing it fondly with spittle before devouring it.

'Naked aggression,' exclaimed Nelson as he watched the red tentacles lap round the meat and dissolve it into a glistening liquid. 'The raw purity of survival. It may have shocked Darwin's contemporaries who liked to think of themselves as civilised, but this is the real essence of life. Not Beethoven, not the American Constitution, nor the space race. Beauty, civilisation, peace, they're Man chasing dreams because he hasn't got the stomach to face up to this.'

He pointed at the glass. Carried away by his rhetoric he didn't notice how close his finger was until the jelly leapt up at him, rattling the glass.

'Look at it, Loring,' he said with distaste. 'That's us as we really are, under all our clothes and customs. And we'd forgotten because we haven't had to fight like that since we crawled out of the primordial swamp. Take a good look. It's what Steve and the others faced when they got up there. And it's what they've brought back. It's totally inimical to human life, and if we give it half a chance it will destroy us all.'

He brought his bare knuckles down on the bench with a crash. 'This is what we're up against, and I've got less than five hours to make those bone-heads at Houston see it.'

He removed the pullulating cells to a lead-lined chamber over by the wall and the Geiger counter was silent.

'Get on to Overton again,' he told Loring. 'Tell them to hurry. We don't want a detailed analysis, an educated guess will do.'

He turned sharply towards the door.

'I'll give them one last chance to listen to me and call off the countdown. Otherwise I'm prepared to blow the gaff on the whole thing.'

TEN

THE ORANGE glow of the night sky blanched the stars. Heavy plumes of cloud rose from the giant spools of the cooling towers to obscure the moon. It was the stillest part of the night, when the earth swings into the coldest reaches of space and halts nervously, drawing in her breath for the journey back into light. It was a time when the earth renews long-lost affinities with her dark past, recalling the lifeless planetary aeons before matter learnt to crawl and hunt and eat.

The man-made clouds hung over the power plant, trapping the sodium lights in an orange haze that cut off the night and made a twilight artificial world of concrete towers and steel gantries where spotlights burned and steam spouted. It was an unearthly ship gliding through the black waters of the surrounding darkness.

A scream pierced the stillness. Out of the night came a trembling roar of sound that grew with the seconds. White eyes bored through the night and a body that lashed and twitched as it weaved its way in pursuit scattered light across the dark earth. A train swung into the orange twilight of the power plant and hit the points with a volley of noise like gunfire. It threaded its way through the flanks of parked freight-liners with a hollow roar before bursting free with a triumphant shriek and disappearing into the distance. The silence returned like a clenched fist.

The thing cowered close to the earth whimpering softly to itself. Slowly the eyes lifted again to the sky and fear crept back into them.

Behind it the hunt was closing in. Not far away searchlights probed the shadows and men's voices shouted instructions. It

was a hunted thing now and knew it. A son of Cain. Outlawed.

But a worse fear lay ahead. The orange haze rose like a storm to meet him, and the heat inside him beat against the fear and drove him towards it. That was where his new loyalties lay, his new being. His humanity had dripped away in the seared flesh, in the blood of those he'd murdered. A choking sob wracked his burning body and he bled hot tears for his loss, for his human soul, for his precious stars that had all gone out leaving him with nothing but the bitter choking dust of the hot red desert.

He raised the endless stumps to his purblind eyes and wept for his hands. Soft flowers once that could touch and caress, speak and pray. But they'd turned against him, scratched and clawed their way into the warm hearts of fellow men and spilt the sweet joy of life. He wept for his eyes that Columbus-like had surveyed the uncharted seas of space and been blinded by the magnificence of a million suns. Now they were blinded by blood and their own corruption, running with the stinking pus of his monstrous degradation. Above all he wept for the love that had once lived in his own heart but had now curdled to violent rage and hatred.

He howled at the sky and cursed the fate that had made him the bearer of the first seeds of destruction.

Someone had heard his cry and was beckoning him.

In a cutting at the side of the track the two hobos had made a fire. It had burnt low and the red embers lit their flushed and swollen faces. Three empty spirit bottles lay strewn on the ground in front of them. The fourth hung from the limp grip of one of the hobos who stared sightlessly into the dying fire. The other had been trying to prepare a meal. A blackened pan tilted precariously over the fire causing the hot embers to hiss as the contents of beans and sausages leaked down the edge and sent spurts of steam into the cold air.

The one looking after the meal had lurched drunkenly to his feet and was waving at the figure in the shadows, beckoning almost pleadingly for him to come and share their fire. When the figure didn't move he sat down heavily.

'Aw right then,' he slurred. 'We'll keep our bloody hospitality.'

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He waved his arm in the direction of the whisky bottle but his companion took no notice, continuing to stare drunkenly at the fire. With a grunt he levered himself on to his knees and crawled round to retrieve the bottle. In the process he knelt on a hot ember and rolled over on to his side letting out a shriek of pain. He lay on the ground rubbing his leg, then fell to staring morosely up at the sky.

Nothing stirred but for the occasional hiss and bubble of the slowly dripping pan.

'Wha' d'you reckon they'll find up there, Johnny?' he suddenly demanded.

Johnny wasn't listening. The booze had numbed his brain.

'I'll tell you what they'll find,' went on the hobo, ignoring his friend's muteness. 'They'll find damn all, 'cos there's damn all there to find.'

He waved his arm dismissively at the heavens and fell back on to the ground with the effort.

' 'sall a waste of money,' he shouted, ' 'cos there's nothing there. Nothing anywhere. We're the only goddam creatures in the whole of the universe.' He lurched drunkenly to his feet. 'And we're drunk!' he roared and collapsed again to the ground helpless with laughter.

There was a noise from the shadows. It sounded like heavy asthmatic breathing. The hobo heard it and sat up.

'Hoho!' he cried. 'So you've heard we've got some booze, eh? I knew that'd bring you. Booze allus brings 'em.' He subsided into chortlings of mirth at his own shrewd grasp of human nature.

'Come on! he called. 'Come on, you're welcome. Come an' 'ave something to eat.'

But nothing moved in the shadows and the hobo became absorbed in stirring the food in the pan with a twig. More of the beans toppled into the fire with a noisy hiss.

'And what d'you suppose 'appened to the other three?' he suddenly asked mysteriously.

The question was lost on the night air as the hobo wrestled the bottle from the hand of his mute companion. He took a long swig and lurched round the fire until he was at the same side as their invisible guest was lurking. He held out the bottle as bait.

'You might as well come out,' he said in a stage whisper. 'We know you're there.'

He shook the contents of the bottle. 'It'll warm your insides.'

Again nothing stirred in the shadows, only the pained breathing could be heard.

The hobo's voice hardened with impatience.

'You can't frighten us, you know,' he called. 'We've nothing to lose.' He turned back towards the smouldering fire, throwing a parting shot.

'Corse if you prefer to stay there where it's cold, and where there's nothing to eat, it's all right by us.'

He threw himself down by the side of his friend and took another swig from the bottle. He handed it to his friend but again got no response.

The sound of another train ripped through the night. The hobo watched it, mesmerised by the flickering carriage lights. When the train had passed and the night had grown still again a shadow crouched at the opposite side of the fire.

The hobo didn't bother to look up but began prodding the sausages with the stick. 'What kept you, then?' he asked.

The fire had nearly gone out. The beans were no longer cooking and the drips had stopped sizzling. Only a few dying embers remained, glowing like tiny red eyes in the blackness. The stranger stared at them and let out a strange whimper.

The hobo looked up, peering hard at the shadowy figure who'd joined him. But he was having difficulty focusing.

'Here,' he said, passing across the bottle. 'Have a drink of this if you're feeling cold.'

The thing's stump came out to meet the bottle and knocked it out of the drunkard's grasp. Some of it spilt into the embers of the fire and flared up. The drunkard stared into the crumbling skull and the alcohol suddenly froze in his veins.

'Mother!' he cried and fell face downwards into the rekindled fire.

Screaming as the flames burned his face he struggled wildly amongst the hot ashes to try and get a grip and push himself away. His face was coated with the beans and the hot ashes stuck to them like glue. As he tried to scrape the burning stuff off he was engulfed with foul-smelling breath. A crushing thud

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to the back of the neck and he was back amongst the ashes screaming for his life.

The screams brought the other hobo from out of his coma. He jumped to his feet and began dancing round the fire like a punch-drunk prize-fighter, brain and muscle a mile out of concert. With a single blow from his severed arm the thing brought him down like a fly.

Another train roared out of the night and passed through the orange haze of the power plant. Steel hit steel in an echoing shudder as the wheels spun across the points, and in an ecstasy of release the locomotive shrilled and plunged back into the darkness.

When the sound had subsided all was silent around the camp fire. Apart from the lapping sound and the slow drip, drip of blood on to hot ashes.

The blood could not slake his raging thirst. As he sucked and slobbered on the warm meat the cells clamoured insatiably. The time was coming when his ailing body could no longer provide for its rapacious guests. Nothing short of total destruction would appease them. He'd confronted the principle of anti-life, and he knew.

They'd grown very withdrawn that last night in the descent module. The experts would have put it down to nerves about lift-off and the success of the docking. No one wanted to be marooned on the red planet. But they were experts in terrestrial psychology and they were wrong. Up here everything was different. The mind rapidly acquired new habits.

The others had been lucky enough to miss the storm, yet they were just as anxious as he was. When one of them spoke, which was rarely, the others would turn expectantly, waiting for him to let something slip, something they wanted to know which hadn't been vouchsafed to them. They'd become aware that they were on an errand, but they were still waiting to know what it was.

Fulfilment drew imperceptibly closer. They sat

looking out of the cabin windows at the setting sun. Dark blue shadows crept towards them across the red dusty floor of the planet. Night spread like a bruise across the sky to where the distant sun hung bleeding slowly to death in the thin Martian air. It was a death without sorrow because no life mourned it.

As the fallen rim of the sun burnt out on the jagged edge of the horizon, the planet exhaled in a shudder of expectation. Out of nowhere a wind sprang up, bearing the frost like a knife which, with no life to slash at, contented itself with sawing away at the rocks, making an ounce of dust a millenium to toss at the empty sky. But aeons of dust covered the ground and they felt the invisible hand stirring it, impious fingers unmaking the grave that hid the planet's secret.

They waited impatiently to know.

It knew they were there. Out there in the lifeless cold it sensed their warm bodies, heard their heartbeats, smelt the whiff of the fear glands. And like a dog at the hearth who feels the wolf at the door, they stirred uneasily, for they knew too.

It had a whole planet to itself, millions of barren acres, but the huddled human cells in the tiny module sang nervously in the huge silence, and like a relentless bird of prey it homed in on them, sweeping the black sky with vast red wings in tightening circles of fear.

The familiar scrape on the hull heralded the arrival of the first flurry of sand: like a tongue that licks gently, tentatively exploring, tickling the juices that will be the signal to the teeth. Then more arrived, squads of the advance party rattling the skin of the module, growing in intensity as they were baulked by the resistance of metal. Then the claws bit, scratching away at the hull in mounting fury, running all over it, probing for a weakness.

Through the window they watched the cloud thicken, blotting out the white light of the stars in a red night. The sand expended its fury on the tough laminated glass, lodging in the corners and growing as

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it got a hold, like snow in a blizzard. Steve watched it in fascination. It glinted in the light of the cabin and he became conscious of movement – grains flowing across the glass in exploratory sweeps. Movement with a purpose.

As he watched, the red grains at the edges began to fall in towards the middle, as though something was pulling them, making them coalesce into a crude round stain in the centre of the glass. It was thick and dense and deep red, making the flurrying clouds behind pale in comparison. Then the edges of the stain began to spread out again in probing tendrils. He counted five, like a giant red hand plucking at the window, its movements growing more frenzied as its frustration seemed to mount. Then the whole thing detached itself from the glass and hurled itself against it until they felt the window shake with the impact. Again and again it tried. It was pounding against the glass in a red rage.

Other drumming sounds erupted in different quarters of the module. It was trying to force its way in elsewhere, beating a tattoo on the thin alloy hull of the craft.

They stood in fear in the centre of the module. The Geiger counter on the control panel began to click dangerously. They were besieged and could do nothing in their own defence but pray that their frail craft could withstand the attack.

The bangings began to alter. Instead of an unconcerted volley, the sound began to take on a rhythm, coordinating its efforts so that the attacks were in time, beating like a heavy pulse, a heart-beat, against the sides and top of the module. The craft began to shake.

They didn't know whether it was the effect of the banging, but the specimen jars they'd collected began to rattle. Nothing else was affected. They were stored in racks to one side of the bunks. Steve watched spell-bound as a flask crept towards the edge of the rack and fell to the floor. The seal broke and a thick red

substance oozed out. It didn't flow but seemed to gather itself. Then it began to flex to the rhythm of the drumming on the hull.

Steve panicked. 'Get it out of here,' he shouted. 'It'll grow.'

It seemed to sense his fear and take advantage of it. A soft red foot of jelly bled outwards in his direction. It stopped, steadied itself, and then drew the bulk of the jelly after it. It was walking towards him.

Mike was the first to act. He picked up a scoop they'd used for collecting dust samples and slid it under the jelly. He whipped it up and turned towards the airlock.

'Open the hatch!' he shouted. But it was too late. It had jerked off the shovel on to the bare skin of the back of his hand.

'Christ! It burns!' he screamed. 'The door!'

McManus worked furiously at the screw. As he swung open the door Mike pushed past him into the lock, wildly shaking his arm as he tried to dislodge the thing. It came loose and hit the floor with a splat. In an instant it was gathering in the dispersed tendrils and rounding itself into a defensive ball.

'Look!' yelled Steve. Round the seam of the outside hatch more of the stuff was seeping into the module.

They slammed the airlock door and screwed it up tightly. Mike's arm was unmarked but he complained of a burning sensation as if it had been splashed with acid. Steve treated it with an antiseptic ointment.

The drumming had stopped, as if outside they'd been witness to the drama in the module and had been awaiting the outcome. The silence grew into minutes.

Suddenly there was a creaking sound and they felt the floor shift beneath their feet. Outside against the window the stains had gathered into long lines stretching across the glass. The grains of the substance began to tighten as they watched. Somewhere in the roof there was a thud as a plate of the hull began to buckle. They were being squeezed like a pea-pod.

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'Get the suits,' shouted McManus. 'It's going to burst the skin.'

Again they struggled to open the airlock. The outside hatch was covered now and it was creeping rapidly across the roof in a series of exploratory waves. Steve grabbed the suits and was turning back into the cabin when a piece dislodged itself from the roof and dropped like a spider on a red thread on to his head. He pushed the suits through the door and tore at his hair. He could feel the heat on his skull and his hands stung as he touched it. It was like a huge blob of warm glue.

He managed to pluck it off, squeeze it together in his hands so that it pulped through his fingers, and hurl it at the airlock wall. It splashed outwards on contact and he watched with horror as each separate part began to convulse with an independent animation.

He shook with revulsion as he leaned heavily on the airlock door trying to regain his breath after the effort of getting back into the cabin. His hands felt as though they'd been plunged inside a bed of nettles.

'What can we do?' he gasped desperately.

'Prepare for lift-off,' shouted McManus, taking control of the situation. 'But get those suits on first.'

As he spoke, another plate thudded as it began to buckle with the strain from outside. They struggled into the suits in the confined space of the cabin. Take-off was going to be difficult in them. It demanded much more freedom of movement to check the instrumentation. But it was their only chance.

Countdown seemed to take an eternity. But everything had to be checked. One mistake and they'd topple over into the Martian dust for ever.

As Mike began to check out the readings on his panel, Steve glanced at the hatch door. The wheel was slowly turning.

He leapt from his seat and grabbed a rock sample probe. He wedged the steel shaft through the spokes of the wheel and hard up against the corner of the cabin.

He felt the shaft strain, but it held and the handle was still. A series of thuds echoed against the panel as something hurled itself furiously at the door. The air-lock sounded to be heaving with the stuff.

Back in his seat and they were on the last leg of the countdown. It hadn't penetrated the main bulk-head because cabin pressure was still normal. But it could have bent the docking joints. If that was the case they were wasting their time. If they ever did get back into orbit they'd never get into the ship again.

'Three, two, one, zero.'

McManus punched the fire button and the rockets roared into life. Instead of lifting, the module began to shake violently.

'We're bloody stuck!' he shouted in dismay. 'It won't let go of us.'

Steve twisted round in his seat so that he could see through the nearest window. The flames from the rockets lit up the dust storm, revealing a maelstrom of orange sand. Red eyes gleamed balefully through the chaos before launching themselves at the ship and battering against the glass. Above the roar of the engines they could hear the impact as they hurled themselves at the hull from all sides. The strands that crossed the window and tethered the ship were growing thicker as more and more of the red glue arrived.

'More throttle,' screamed Steve. 'Damn the computer. Take over on manual.'

The rockets whined in response to the extra fuel and they felt the thrust begin to take them away from the ground. But again they were held and the module began to wobble violently.

'We're going over,' yelled McManus.

But Steve had seen something in the corner of his helmet.

'More power,' he screeched. 'More!'

Where the red tentacles disappeared from sight towards the base of the module, flames were rising. As they came into contact with the alien growth it began

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to stiffen and shrivel, falling to the ground in bright red flakes. The bonds were disintegrating like rotten hawsers.

As they broke free at one side the module began to keel over as the starboard rocket delivered full thrust. Only quick thinking by McManus saved them. He swiftly cut the motors of the starboard rocket and they felt the craft lurch back and begin to fall to earth. It was swinging crazily like a pendulum. By a series of deft boosts of the rocket motor he had to try and keep them up while the port engines burnt their way through the stuff that was still holding them.

Another sickening lurch and they thought they'd had it, but by a miracle McManus managed to stabilise them again. They'd broken free and as the module steadied herself they felt the full boost of the engines lifting them upwards. Above the roar of the rockets a sudden tearing sound rent the hull. Steve jerked up, expecting to see the plates ripped open and the stars exposed, but it was the last despairing bid of the planet to hold on to them. In a rush of grating metal the module slipped through the giant claws and outside the window he watched red skeins of melting jelly slithering past earthwards.

They rose to meet the sun again.

As they climbed above the surface of the red planet the sun reappeared, smaller and whiter. Her light still lit the far side of the planet and a jagged arc of shadow marked the encroaching night. When the module tilted into orbit they could see the launch site. Dimly they saw a huge red stain lying motionless on the desert floor, waiting.

But now a new danger confronted them. A battery of red warning lights was signalling fuel problems. The fuel level was critical and it was touch and go whether they had enough to get them to the docking point. Burning themselves free had cost them dearly in valuable propellants, and they were carrying extra weight which they could only assume was the remains

of the stuff that still clung to the module. How much there was they didn't know; their outside cameras were useless. The lenses must have been smothered to judge from the bright red featureless pictures they were getting.

They managed a ragged cheer of relief when the orbiting ship came into view. They watched its pristine silver hull glinting against the deep black velvet background of space. It had nothing to do with the squalid red nightmare of the planet but was an escape into the clean empty world of the remote stars.

The rendezvous was difficult. They had to rely on the computer to send data to the ship instructing her to modify her orbit. They hadn't enough fuel to risk doing it themselves, every ounce was needed for the actual docking operation. Their emergency take-off had meant a rapid recalculation of all their data. Nothing now could run to plan and that meant everything could go wrong. They knew their chances of survival were small, but their escape from the planet gave them a will to fight on.

Yet despite the difficulties it was as if some hidden hand was guiding them, making sure they'd get back to earth. The fuel held out while they made the tricky manoeuvres that brought them level with the ship, and by some miracle the docking mechanism was undamaged. Less than two hours after quitting the surface of the planet they were ready to crawl back into the mother ship in preparation for the journey back home.

They had to leave the module by the same means as they did on Mars: through the airlock and out of the hatch which was now locked on to the ship. None of them had given any thought to the stuff that had crawled into the airlock. Since take-off they'd heard no noises so they'd assumed it had left in the same mysterious way it had arrived.

They'd been so busy with the docking arrangements they hadn't got round to removing their suits. Only

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when they were ready to open the airlock door to crawl through to the ship did any doubts trouble them. They all agreed they'd be better with the suits on in case any of the stuff was still about. In the event they were wise.

Steve removed the shaft of the rock probe and began to unscrew the lock. Nothing stirred beyond the door and he felt no pressure on the panel. But when he tried to pull back the door it was stuck. Could the buckled bulk-head plates have caused the exits to jam? Had they got so far to find themselves imprisoned in the module only feet from the lifeline that would take them safely back to Earth?

Steve cursed and tore at the handle. He wanted to be free of the module and away from the sickening memories of their struggle with the invading substance. He wanted to be somewhere safe where he could get rid of the stifling space suit, where he could breathe without this awful constriction in his lungs that made them burn. Most of all he wanted to be alone at the observation dome aboard the returning ship contemplating the vast infinity of his universe in peace.

With the help of the others he got the door to move. It tore like setting adhesive, and flakes of red, like lichen, fell at their feet. The hinges were coated with the stuff and it was an effort to prise the door back far enough for them to pass through. The surrounds were covered in fronds of the dried jelly, light and dry so that they waved in the gently circulating air of the cabin. They seemed to be beckoning the men through into another world.

They hesitated, none of them wishing to go first. They sensed a hostile presence, as if they'd brought something with them from the still centre of the Martian storm, something that hadn't finished with them yet.

The lights which normally went on inside the airlock when the hatch was opened weren't working. The stuff must have wrecked the contact. It was too dark to see inside, dark with a faint glimmer of red.

Steve took a torch and shone it inside. It illuminated nothing. It was as useless as a torch in dense fog, the light scattering, glowing red.

They had to run the gauntlet if they were to get back into the ship. An unknown gauntlet.

He turned to the others and wanted to embrace them, bid them goodbye. They'd travelled forty million miles from Earth, but the few feet back into the ship was to be the longest journey. He wanted to feel the warmth of their bodies, know that the blood coursed there like it did in his own body. Through them he wanted to confirm his own humanity before he lost it. But he could only feel the lifeless fabric of their suits, and through the visors of their helmets see the eyes dilated with fear.

He turned and disappeared into the hatch.

It was like entering a huge eye, through the flecked surround where the dried jelly hung and into the dark cavity beyond the pupil. The airlock had become the black storeroom for the alien consciousness and he felt its presence as it squatted among the unlost images of its own genesis.

He saw the angry predator again rampaging through the green fields of the young planet in a riot of brutal carnage. Only this time he was no longer a spectator but the prey, stumbling along on legs of wool as the sky behind him curdled with hate and the hot saliva dripped on his neck in the eternity before death struck.

He bathed with the jubilant hunters in the flooding streams of crimson blood that burst from the torn flanks of their victim, and watched it turn to mud as the shells of war whined and the cordite seared his lungs. It held him tied to the spot as the bomb at his feet ticked away.

Then he saw the birth of the alien force, the anti-life. He watched the nuclear creation.

The silver bomb hung over the geometrical city. It carried the seeds that would spill from the ripped

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nuclei of the exploding atoms. Beneath it the people swarmed in wild panic, clusters of living cells for the seeds to fertilise. The bomb burst and in the white-hot crucible of the seared city, life embraced death in an ecstasy of destructive creation. In the heat of a thousand suns the raw forces of life were fused with the energy of matter. The living protoplasm of the city, of the planet, was unmade and made again with a new and vital element—the mutant gene of pure aggression. The quintessence of destruction was born out of the supreme folly of warfare.

The universe stood silent witness to the creation of her most deadly species.

As the dust settled on the lost civilisation of Mars, crisp red flakes, like lichen, fell and lay hidden.

So it had waited through the empty aeons for the tell-tale flash that told of a civilisation coming to maturity. But no one came. Sometimes in a fury of impatience it would set off and scour the dead surface of the planet, searching hungrily like a dog licks an empty bowl. But nothing had survived. It could only wait.

Then the flash came, so close to home. The blue star, its nearest neighbour. What incredible luck!

After so long waiting it seemed so short a time before they arrived. And to send them back and wait a little longer for others to come was no hardship. To destroy them now would be rash and foolish. They were the bait to hook a whole star and sate its lust for destruction for ever. Or until others came from other worlds. And others.

So it let them go.

They never spoke about their ordeal in the airlock on the long journey back. It was to each his personal nightmare and they kept it locked away, hidden with the alien seeds they bore. There would be a time, a season, when the truth would be known. Meanwhile they must wait, protectively, as a man protects the

knowledge of his cancer from the pity or disgust of others.

Long after they had left the orbit of the red planet, the module was drawn relentlessly back into the thin Martian atmosphere. It spiralled downwards through the alien sky and burst in a cloud of dust and twisted metal on to the darkened planetary floor. Before the dust had time to settle a red shape gathered itself up from the broken remains and scuttled off deep into the Martian shadows like a giant spider.

ELEVEN

FRED ZIMWELL had grown very nervous. They'd moved the radioactive dish into some apparatus on the bench above him. As he crouched underneath he rehearsed the doctor's words: naked aggression, inimical to all human life. He'd picked up enough from their conversation to know that he'd stumbled across the secret of the three missing astronauts, that they'd brought back some deadly alien growth, and that he was on to the biggest scoop of all time. He'd got to file his story within the next hour if he was to stand any chance of getting it to press that day.

The thing to do was to reveal himself now and damn the consequences. He'd need their co-operation if his story was to have any credibility, and he'd been encouraged by the doctor's threat about blowing the gaff. He couldn't afford to wait any longer. Besides, he was pretty sure he'd heard some nasty noises coming from the bench above. That thing could be trying to get out.

He was just moving his aching legs when a telephone rang. He heard the other scientist walk across the lab and answer it. There was a long pause then a gasp of astonishment. 'Radio signals?' he heard the scientist say. 'Are you sure?' Another long pause and the tone of voice changed to one of urgency. 'I'll see that he's told right away,' he said. 'Thank you.' As he put the receiver down the lab door burst open. It was Nelson.

'Irresponsible lunatics!' he bellowed. 'What do I have to do to convince them to call it off? They think to increase the thickness of the radiation shields is enough. What do they know about it?' he raged. 'Bloody clockwork soldiers prepared to put international prestige before human life. Well we'll see what the

rest of the world thinks about that. I'm getting on to the press agencies.'

Zimwell couldn't believe he'd get such a cue. He self-consciously extricated himself from beneath the bench and delivered a breathless introduction. Never before had he felt so profoundly the inadequacy of the reputation of the *Trentham Globe*.

Before he had time to finish, Loring had reached for the phone and was asking for security. Nelson stopped him.

'It's the first break we've had,' he told Loring. 'It's a threat we can use that will make them listen.'

'And you'll go to jail,' retorted Loring. 'To say nothing of what will happen to your job and the centre.'

'I've just resigned the job,' answered the doctor coldly. 'My one and only concern now is to alert the world to the dangers of Prometheus Two leaving Earth. Nothing else matters.'

Loring was silent. 'I think there's something else you should know,' he said. 'I've just had the HEP lab on with their analysis of the electron microscope plate. The track was caused by a highly penetrative radioactive particle being used as a carrier signal for some sort of complex chemical data.'

'What?' exclaimed Nelson. 'How do they know that?'

'One of their satellites has been receiving the signal for the past fortnight. Ever since Prometheus One landed, in fact.'

'You mean those cells in Steve have been transmitting data about him ever since they got back?' interrupted Nelson. 'That something out there on Mars is monitoring the changes taking place in his body? Measuring the success of the alien cells which it infected him with?'

Loring nodded grimly.

Nelson covered his tired eyes in a gesture of despair.

'He's been a guinea-pig all along,' he said as he saw the scale of the threat confirmed. 'When the crew of Two get up there it will know exactly what to do to breed off them successfully. What they bring back will make Steve's exploits seem like a vicarage teaparty. My God!'

There was an eruption of sound from the lead cabinet where they'd put the culture.

'Make sure that's locked and put those leads bricks on top so

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that they'll absorb all the radiation,' instructed Nelson. 'We may unwittingly have been helping it. We'll have to starve the stuff to death. And make sure all the other cultures are destroyed. Incinerate them to be sure.'

He turned to Zimwell with a strange appraising look.

'You'd better come with me, and get ready to write the biggest story since the Flood.'

As Zimwell put the finishing touches to his notes and prepared to leave for the office, Doctor Nelson's pocket radio began to bleep imperiously. He grabbed it and switched it on.

'Nelson,' he barked.

'Sharpe here,' came a precise military voice. 'We've got him.'

Nelson's hand stiffened round the set. 'Where is he?' he demanded.

'He's been spotted in the marshalling yard at the Gretworth Power Plant. We've got the place surrounded.' The voice sounded grave. 'He's got two others. Two hobos who were camping by the lines. They're a right mess.'

'Don't go near him,' ordered Nelson. 'I'll be round right away.'

The doctor grabbed his medical bag and sprinted towards the door.

'See you get that story out,' he shouted to Zimwell as he disappeared into the corridor. 'I'm banking on you.'

Zimwell was close on his heels. 'All right if I tag along—?' he began. But the doctor wasn't listening. He pushed his head round the lab door and shouted some instructions to his assistant then he was off down the corridor at full tilt in the direction of the car park. By the time Zimwell had got his head outside the doctor was into his car and speeding towards the gate.

Zimwell dashed after him. He didn't wait to answer the cries of the security man on the gate. The one thing that would make this story was a picture. If he could get a shot of the maniac spaceman it would be better than a thousand of Nelson's dire forecasts about the future of the world if the launch went ahead. He had a camera in the car and he reckoned he'd just got

time to follow Nelson to the plant and take some pictures and get back to the office ready to phone through his story and accept the invitation to join the staff of the *New York Times*.

He emitted a whoop of delight as he jumped into the driving seat of his car and set off at breakneck speed after the doctor.

The marshalling yard was crawling with military personnel and police when Doctor Nelson arrived. They were all here now, he reflected bitterly. But where had they been for the past eighteen hours during which time seven lives had been lost?

He glanced at his watch. Two thirty. In four and a half hours the first fatal move would begin in an insane enterprise which would lead to the death of millions. Unless the newspapers did their work and he could come up with proof that his theory was true. If he could get to Steve and speak to him he still believed he could learn what really happened to the crew of Prometheus One.

Mist had gathered in the cold night air. A heavy orange aura spilt from the sodium lights and bathed the power plant complex. The giant cooling towers rose out of the orange mist, smooth-flanked and grey as sick flesh. Above them cloud had hidden the moon and stars.

The Captain met him at the gate. He was brisk and efficient.

'He's over by the second tower. He doesn't seem to want to move. We've got him surrounded and I've got lights on him. There's no question of us losing him this time.' Then he added grimly: 'And we've got machine-guns on the bastard too in case he tries anything.'

Nelson looked at him sharply but the Captain had read his thoughts.

'You should see what he's done to those poor hobos,' he said bitterly. 'I thought I'd seen everything when we found that farmer, but that was nothing.'

They were halfway across the huge yard. Over to their left was the main turbine room where they could hear the hum of the generators. Ahead the scene was changing. The area was grassed and the night filled with the sound of cascading water.

'No wonder he doesn't want to move,' said Nelson as he felt

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the full force of the downdraught of cold air as they passed the first cooling tower.

Round the huge sculptured sides of the tower they met the Captain's men. They ringed the second cooler, seventy-five yards or so from its base. Most of them lay flat on their bellies, their eyes squinting down the sights of their rifles. Some of them knelt behind machine-guns. At intervals round the siege circle were army trucks with searchlights mounted on the backs. Yellow beams of light cut through the darkness and lit the base of the tower like daylight.

At first Nelson couldn't make anything out. Under the immense hollow funnel there was a lattice of angled struts through which the tumbling water fell. The searchlights were diffused by the spilling water into dazzling clouds of light. It was like sunlight bursting on the surf of an ocean.

Then he saw him. Dwarfed by the massive superstructure of the tower that climbed above him, he stood waist-deep in the swirling water. His back was to the light and his face turned upwards to catch the cool flow of the cascading stream. The stumps of his arms were raised as if to try and hold the precious soothing drops.

The doctor's throat went dry. 'I'm going over to try and have a word with him,' he said.

The Captain's protests were drowned in the roar of the water as he turned and walked towards the tower.

Steve was standing perfectly still. He was naked apart from the tattered remains of the hospital robe that still hung round his neck. And he was pathetically thin. How had he managed to kill in such a state? thought Nelson. The bones of his pelvis had broken through the skin and his back was rippled where the ribs were barely covered. Yet his dripping body shone with a strange red menace, the same luminescence that Nelson had seen on the severed arm. At his waist the water was stained where the pressure of the cascading waterfall had sloughed off the degenerated tissue.

Only a small wall separated them now, and over the rush of splashing water he called his name.

'Steve. Steve.'

Steve turned slowly and the haunted skull faced him. A

flicker of recognition passed like a phantom across his shattered features.

‘What happened up there, Steve?’ cried Nelson. ‘For God’s sake what happened?’

Fred Zimwell had no difficulty getting past the soldiers on guard at the power plant gates. He couldn’t believe his luck until he realised that he’d still got the borrowed lab coat on. They must have thought he was one of the doctor’s staff.

He clutched his camera and ran across the yard to where he could see the searchlights. An officer tried to stop him but he pushed past and made towards the focus of attention: the two figures confronting one another at the base of the cooling tower. He raised his camera at the spectral figure in the water, but Nelson pushed out an arm to try and stop him.

‘Get back, you bloody fool!’ he shouted.

But Zimwell hadn’t got so far to be thwarted. Nelson had planted himself between him and the wall, right in the way of his shot. He pushed him fiercely aside so that the doctor slipped on the wet grass and fell to the ground with a yell of alarm. As Zimwell turned to look through the viewfinder there was a sudden eruption of water at the base of the tower. With a gurgle of choking rage the dripping spectre lurched over the wall and leapt at him. He felt the putrid slime cover his face and his terrified cry erupt not from his mouth but from the gaping hole that had appeared in his throat. Then he was lifted from his feet and hurled at the metal struts that held the tower. The rush of water and night blotted his senses.

Nelson watched in horror. ‘No, Steve,’ he shouted. ‘No.’

The thing turned, a despairing look in the cavernous skull, then lurched off towards the ring of soldiers. An order rang out above the noise of rushing water and the troops opened fire.

As the searchlights followed the retreating figure Nelson saw bits of flesh flying as the bullets struck their target. But it was unaffected by them and the line of troops parted in amazement as the incredible figure burst past them and across the yard before disappearing into the turbine room.

Fred Zimwell’s body lay face downwards under the water-

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fall, the tails of his borrowed lab coat spread out above him. The broken camera strap still clung to his neck and his notebook floated away into the shadows at the foot of the giant cooling tower.

TWELVE

NELSON SET off after him towards the turbine room. He was intercepted by the Captain.

'Don't!' he shouted. 'Leave him to us. He's too dangerous!'

The doctor pushed him aside.

'I must try and speak to him,' he cried. 'Don't you see? He can tell us what happened. He was about to say something when that damn fool reporter arrived. Why the hell did you let him through?'

He didn't let the Captain explain but sprinted for the door where Steve had disappeared. The Captain dashed after him.

The door led on to the lower deck of the turbine room. It was brightly lit and Nelson stood for a moment in the doorway blinded by the lights. It was a vast and complicated building, a modern cathedral to the god of thermal energy. Through the maze of steam ducts that stretched before them they could see the massive cylindrical turbines which dominated the centre of the great hall. Everything was dazzlingly clean, right down to the white tiled floor.

'Where's he gone?' shouted the Captain, his voice echoing out above the powerful hum of the giant generators.

Nelson's eyes searched the deck for any sign of movement. Where would he go? he thought. He'd seen the despair in his eyes, the helpless, hunted look. He would try to hide, hide somewhere and die in agony.

'You'd think there'd be blood stains somewhere,' shouted the Captain, examining the spotless floor. 'He won't go far. He must be pretty badly injured.'

'Your bullets didn't affect him,' said Nelson quietly. 'The

alien cells are controlling him, otherwise he'd have been dead long ago.'

The Captain didn't understand. He gripped the barrel of his rifle tightly.

'We'll get a proper look at him in here,' he said. 'And there won't be any mistakes this time.'

Nelson had suddenly spotted a shining smear on the black hand rail of the companionway up to the next deck. Without speaking he set off up the iron stairs. The Captain and two of his men were soon on his heels.

The second deck was more open, just a huge apron of tiled floor around the string of turbines that spread across the hall. Catwalks were slung between the huge polished flanks of the generators, and it was high on one of the ladders that rose from one of these to the roof of the largest turbine that Nelson caught a movement. It was Steve.

He ran across the floor and up a short flight of stairs on to the catwalk. The trail of mucus seemed to be getting thicker as though the degeneration process was beginning to accelerate. There was no time to lose.

He paused at the bottom of the ladder. He couldn't see over the curved top of the turbine, but he knew he was there. He edged his way up the ladder before stopping again and calling out. His voice echoed emptily in the high roof.

One step at a time he crept to the top. He hesitated before allowing his head to breast the rim, listening to see if he could catch the awful strangled breathing of the dying man. But he heard nothing for the drone of the machinery. One more step and his head was over the top of the ladder and looking straight into the red pools of hate and fear that had once been human eyes.

The shock sent him reeling backwards. He grabbed at the ladder but it slipped through his grasp. The iron rungs drummed painfully against his chest as he slid down, scraping and bruising his arms as he tried desperately to cling on. He hit the catwalk with both his feet, sending a jolt through his body that nearly split his spine. He keeled over on to the back and lay there chasing his scattered senses.

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With the help of the rail he dragged himself to his feet, rubbing his arms and chest in a bid to disperse the stinging pain. He'd twisted his ankle and it would hardly bear his weight. Apart from that he was lucky, nothing was broken. He cursed his stupidity for allowing Steve's appearance to alarm him. It was hideous but he must get beyond the surface to the mind, to see what could be salvaged. Steve had recognised him, he knew. So there was hope that the memory was still intact.

He hauled himself painfully back up the ladder. As he lifted his head above the top he saw Steve halfway along the top of the turbine. He had his back to him and was hesitating in apparent confusion. Nelson soon saw the reason. The head of that damn fool soldier, Sharpe, had appeared at the opposite end of the turbine. Steve was trapped.

Nelson clambered up to the top.

'Leave him to me, Captain,' he called. 'We don't want any accidents.'

Steve looked round as he spoke and seemed to cringe, raising the stumps of his arms as if to ward the doctor off. A pleading look came into the ravaged eyes, the tattered remains of an appeal.

The Captain ignored Nelson's warning and climbed up on to the shining back of the generator. He raised his rifle to his shoulder and stepped determinedly towards the cornered creature. It turned quickly and began pawing the air with sharp jabs like a maimed cat that has lost all but its attacking reflexes. The Captain stopped.

'Stand still or I'll shoot!' he ordered.

The thing froze, turned slowly, guiltily, to look back at the doctor, then crouched, seeming to gather its spindly and glistening form like a defensive spider.

Then it struck,

It moved towards the Captain with remarkable agility. The wet sticky feet acted like pads, certain of their grip on the polished surface. The Captain barked a final command then opened fire.

Nelson had to duck as the bullets tore through the yielding flesh as if it was lard. He saw the bits flying off, splashing on the spotless hull of the turbine. But the holes they made stained red.

for only a second before the jellied flesh slid back to seal the wound.

The impact of the bullets buffeted the thin body and brought it to a standstill. The Captain lowered his rifle and stared in appalled bewilderment. He didn't know what to do. His military training was as redundant as his spent ammunition. He signalled wildly to the soldier at the top of the ladder to shoot, but the man couldn't get a clear aim without hitting the Captain. The thing seemed to sense its advantage and prepared to strike again. Nelson watched in despair as he recognised the familiar movements.

It crouched and the liquid skin seemed to flow around it, obscuring the humanoid shape until it was a glistening mass of angry jelly, glowing hot and red on the glassy roof of the turbine. Then the head and arms oozed forward in attack and the rest followed in a spasm of fury. In the next moment the Captain was fighting off the swirling tide of jelly that lashed and plucked at his face and neck. He grappled helplessly with the chimerical form as it seethed over him, peeling his skin and sucking out the ripe pulp of his body. They heard the bones crack like firewood against the unrelenting pressure of the strangling cells. And when he was limp and ripped as a rag he fell loose with a smack of broken suction and slipped down the smooth side of the turbine in a trail of blood and slime. He fell between the flanks of the machine and the platform, from one level to the other until he hit the high voltage cables below in an explosion of sparks. The hall was plunged into darkness as the body crackled and burnt its way slowly down the cables, sticking as flesh and metal fused to cinders in the white heat of sixteen thousand volts. Then it dropped like molten molasses to the tiled floor and the stench rose from the shadows to revolt their numbed senses.

The huge generators whined to a halt and the great hall was filled with silence. Nelson stood stiff with shock, poised somewhere between his heartbeats. As his senses slowly reawakened he heard the dry rasp of heavy breathing spreading towards him. With it came the wet pad of footprints, peeling their way stickily along the top of the generator. A dim red glow spilt out of the darkness and he felt the warm stickiness touch him. A

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putrid stench filled his lungs as he contracted in terror on the narrow ledge. The reeking jelly slid past him gently caressing his skin and hair. He felt the hot breath on his face and heard the crumbling lips trying to speak. The word began with his name but ended in an anguished choke of pain. It slipped past him on to the ladder and fell with a heavy splat on the bridge below. Then the wet footsteps retreated into the darkness bearing their unspeakable burden of despair.

The voice of the soldier at the other side of the turbine broke the silence. He was calling out to see if Nelson was all right.

It was an effort to struggle free of the nightmare that gripped his soul and answer. The appalling responsibility for what had happened was his, his and that of all the others on the programme. It was their dereliction of duty that had damned Steve to such insupportable suffering. They should have foreseen that an alien life form might attempt such a thing. They'd been criminally blasé. Mars may be a dead planet now, but what of its past? The universe must be full of the dormant spores of lost species waiting like seeds on Earth for their long winter to turn into spring. Why should life in space be any different from life here, an interspecific battle for survival? Confident that they'd face only a barren world they'd taught the explorers how to deal with physical conditions only. Against organic competition, against aggression, they'd sent them naked into the unknown. Their carelessness had betrayed the safety of the whole human species.

Nelson answered the soldier wearily. He felt too exhausted to move. With all the mucus about it was too dangerous to attempt anything but to sit and wait for someone to replace the blown fuses. Steve would be lost to them; the revelation he'd prayed for was only the hopeless dream it had been all along. They'd never know what had happened on the red planet. They'd never be prepared to face the threat when it arrived with the return of Prometheus Two. Whatever was up there knew everything it needed to know about the human host it had chosen to colonise Earth. Steve's ravaged body had seen to that, and perhaps their own ill-conceived experiments. Armed with the knowledge which the alien cells had transmitted back into space

it would return impregnable. The naked aggression of the red cells would seem like a baby at play in comparison.

He heard voices on the lower deck. A searchlight scoured the black interior of the hall. Shocked whispers greeted the discovery of the Captain's charred remains. Anxious shouts floated up to his tired brain. He was too shattered and dispirited to answer.

He awoke to the glare of lights and a look of consternation on the face that peered down on him. As the soldier helped him to his feet, pain stabbed through his ankle and memory flooded back, bitter as guilt.

'Where is he?' he asked. 'Where's Steve?'

'I'm afraid we've lost him, sir,' replied the soldier quietly. 'It was the power failure.'

Outside in the yard the soldiers stood around. News of their captain's death had filtered through to them. A young NCO had taken command and the plant was still surrounded. But the men seemed disheartened and confused. They had not been trained to fight against enemies whom bullets couldn't harm.

With the lights restored they began a search of the plant. They combed it from top to bottom without success. In the negative mood of despair that had seized him when the Captain was killed, Nelson began to feel half glad that they hadn't found him. Perhaps somewhere in the quiet shadows of the vast plant Steve had been allowed to die with the dignity that his last few hours of hunted terror had denied. He'd killed mercilessly, Nelson knew, but he also knew that Steve himself was without blame. He had not deserved to be hunted like a rabid dog, only the alien killer that had usurped his flesh deserved that.

Nelson turned to leave. A cool breeze had blown up as the darkness sensed the dawn. The moon had set and the fleeing clouds had raked the brilliant star clusters back into the sky. The faintest glimmer of daylight lit the eastern horizon.

Dimly silhouetted against the high roof of the turbine room a shapeless figure stared out at the stars.

Nelson saw him and a new hope was born. He dashed back into the plant, ordering the engineer to show him how to get up to the roof. Despite his aching ankle he climbed the service

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ladder that rose high above the generators. There would be no soldiers this time, no reporters, just him and Steve.

He pushed open the door that led out on to the roof. The sky was magnificently clear, the full glory of the Milky Way spun like silk across the heavens. Far away on the edge of the roof, legs dangling over the side like a child on a bridge enraptured by the view, sat what had been Steve. He looked so shrunken and small, so pathetic, naked in the cold night.

Nelson crept towards him.

'Steve,' he called. 'Steve.'

But there was no response this time, no turning of the head.

Nelson stepped closer, repeating the name.

It was no use. The red light had burnt out and his collapsed body was glazed with transparent liquid like a silver chrysalis. Another liquid, just as bright, shone in the empty eyes which still looked out, following the flight of the frightened and bewildered soul to the stars.

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'It's beautiful,' came the voice of the commander. 'Brilliantly clear. There's not a— Wait a minute!'

There was a crackle of interference and the entire staff of mission control fell silent.

The voice resumed, fainter, through a welter of static.

'There's something moving. A sort of haze. It's a dust storm, I think. Moving in our direction, incredibly fast. I've never—'

The radio went dead.

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